

Sustainment Challenges in the Indo-Pacific Theater

■ *By Maj. Morgen Kiser*

The U.S. Indo-Pacific theater possesses many unique sustainment challenges as a maritime environment, including tyranny of distance, limited infrastructure, and a contested environment. The land area scattered throughout the vast Pacific Ocean is minuscule, with islands making up a small fraction of the overall area and with vast swaths of water separating the main island chains. Since the Army is the primary ground combat force for Indo-Pacific operations, power projection and logistical operations are vital to the Army's success in the region. However, these unique challenges create a logistical problem that has not been tested in conflict since Gen. Douglas MacArthur's island-hopping campaign in World War II. Effective sustainment of U.S. forces in a maritime environment requires unity of effort with allies and

partners across the joint force. The Army, specifically, is responsible for the provision of intra-theater lift.

Partner Operations

Beyond the U.S. military branches, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) actively strengthens relationships with regional allies and partners. By fostering cooperation and building partnerships with island nations throughout the Pacific, USINDOPACOM contributes to a more stable and secure region. One way the U.S. fosters relationships is through joint exercises and capacity-building programs that allow for collaboration on security challenges and contribute to regional stability.

The Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative plays a vital role in bolstering regional logistics capabilities. Through this initiative,

the U.S. works with seven partner nations — Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Sri Lanka—to enhance their maritime security and domain awareness. Additionally, there is a provision for personnel from Taiwan, Singapore, and Brunei to join training exercises with incremental funding. This collaboration strengthens regional infrastructure, facilitates joint exercises, and fosters a network of support for U.S. forces and allies operating in the region.

However, multinational operations do not come without their fair share of challenges. Some of these challenges include the following:

- Differing national interests: Countries may have varying priorities and objectives, requiring compromise and clear communication.

- Varying military capabilities: Participating nations may have militaries with different levels of training and equipment, necessitating adaptation and flexibility.
- Cultural differences: Effective communication and mutual understanding are crucial in overcoming cultural barriers and ensuring smooth operations.

Despite the challenges, multinational collaboration on sustainment is essential for USINDOPACOM to achieve its security objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. These operations provide opportunities for shared resources, burden sharing, and a united front against threats, adding weight to diplomatic efforts. USINDOPACOM must continue improving overall sustainment efficiency by working with regional allies and partners to leverage their infrastructure and capabilities.

Joint Operations

Joint operations are imperative to the logistical success of U.S. forces throughout the Indo-Pacific theater. There are considerable Service interdependencies when operating in a maritime environment. Unified land operations in the maritime environment require substantial planning and resources to accomplish the mission. There are several means by which the U.S. achieves jointness in the Indo-Pacific region:

- Unified command structure: USINDOPACOM establi-

shes a single commander with oversight of all military activities in the region. This ensures all branches work toward the same goals. The key roles of USINDOPACOM are defense and security through partnership, presence, and military readiness, promoting regional stability, freedom of navigation, and adherence to international law.

- Joint task forces (JTFs): For specific missions, USINDOPACOM creates temporary JTFs that consist of personnel from all branches, promoting interoperability and effective communication. This allows for tailored responses to evolving situations.
- Standardized procedures and training: All branches adhere to common doctrine and training exercises, ensuring seamless communication and cooperation during joint operations.

By addressing resourcing challenges through cooperation and strategic planning, joint operations can leverage the unique capabilities of each military branch to achieve success in the vast Pacific theater within a multidomain environment.

One of the Army's unique capabilities is intra-theater lift. Joint Publication 4-09, Distribution Operations, specifies that intra-theater sealift is provided by Army watercraft units associated with waterborne operational maneuvers and the intra-theater sealift of units, equipment,

and supplies. Furthermore, U.S. Code Title 10, subtitle B, Part I (chapter 7062) directs the Army to prepare for land combat and to provide watercraft support in a theater of operations in support of geographic combatant commands.

Army Watercraft

To support the combatant commander in large-scale combat operations, Army watercraft are called upon to conduct intra-theater movement of equipment and sustainment materiel, enable maneuver of unit-sized combat-configured forces, and distribute sustainment into an area of operations forward of the strategic or intermediate staging base. Army watercraft enable joint and combined sea-basing and logistics-over-the-shore operations during all phases of operations, they provide the requisite joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational interoperability in ship-to-shore cargo transfers and harbor utility functions, at full fixed ports, partial fixed ports, austere ports, and on bare beaches.

In support of operations in a maritime environment, the Army has recently placed significant resources into increasing watercraft capabilities in range, speed, survivability, and payload, as well as command, control, communications, computers, cyber, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. This is necessary to meet joint all-domain operations requirements and, specifically, to answer the growing demand for enabling operational movement and the maneuver of combat-configured



Soldiers from the 5th Transportation Company participate in an activation ceremony at the Army's dock facility in Yokohama, Japan, Feb. 8, 2024. (Photo by Brian Lamar)

forces and enablers to locations in a theater of operations. The increased resourcing postures Army watercraft to perform the following functions in a multidomain environment:

- Enable operational maneuver.
- Conduct amphibious operations.
- Provide logistics to joint campaigns.
- Maintain organic capability to perform ship-to-shore operations in austere conditions.
- Provide intra-theater transport of critical material and personnel.

Recent resourcing increases have already led to the forward positioning and activation of the 5th Transportation Company (Composite Watercraft Company) in February 2024, stationed in Yokohama, Japan. This is the first permanent Army watercraft company stationed outside

the U.S. in decades. The unit is and will be equipped with a mix of vessels, including Landing Craft Utility (light), and tugboats. The Army also has future growth planned with the activation of two more composite watercraft companies in fiscal years 2027 and 2029. This will lead to a shift in the preponderance of Army watercraft alignment within the USINDOPACOM theater. Modernization, integration, and fleet management will continue to be strategic initiatives, ensuring Army watercraft are postured to perform critical functions and to provide increased capabilities for the Army of 2030 and beyond.

Conclusion

The U.S. military has not fought in a large-scale maritime campaign since World War II. The maritime environment provides significant obstacles and constraints that require

substantial resources. Logistics is the unsung hero of any island-hopping campaign. By overcoming the challenges of distance, limited infrastructure, and vulnerability, meticulous logistical planning and execution pave the way for military success. By leveraging joint and partnered resources, and by increasing Army watercraft posture within the Pacific theater, the U.S. is postured to combat the unique challenges of the region.

Maj. Morgen Kiser currently serves as the U.S. Army Transportation School proponent officer. She graduated from the U.S. Military Academy and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Transportation Corps. Her leadership assignments have included commander of 372nd Inland Cargo Transfer Company, Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and company executive officer of 542nd Support Maintenance Company, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, and forward Camp Buehring, Kuwait. She is a graduate of Combined Logistics Career Course, Transportation Basic Officer Leadership Course, and Air Assault Course. She holds a master's degree in supply chain management and analytics from Virginia Commonwealth University.