



New Priorities, Challenges for America's Pacific Military Command

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The United States Pacific Command, or PACOM, controls the strongest military force in the Asia Pacific region, making it perhaps the region's most important organization. Based in Hawai'i, PACOM describes its mission as defending US interests in a geographic area that encompasses more than half of the earth's surface and population. Yet few Americans and even fewer among America's allies have heard of PACOM, let alone understand what it does. Recently, the East-West Center and Keio University's Global Research Institute hosted a symposium that brought together several experts to discuss PACOM's role in the region and the challenges that PACOM confronts today.

One of these challenges is that the Asia Pacific region faces complex security threats, although no active warfare. Keynote speaker R.J. "Zap" Zlatoper, a retired US Navy admiral and former Pacific Fleet commander, said that the command's top three priorities today are: 1) China's military buildup and increasing aggression in the East and South China Sea; 2) North Korea's growing nuclear capacity combined with an inexperienced leader and severe internal social and economic strains; and 3) international terrorist movements affecting several US allies. Other priorities, he said, include international crime, cyber warfare, the threat of a regional or global pandemic, natural disasters, insurgency movements, the conflict between India and Pakistan, and increasing intrusions by Russia.

But as East-West Center Senior Fellow Denny Roy pointed out, PACOM must compete for resources with other US regional commands that may claim higher priority. Such priorities include ongoing combat operations in the Middle East, the dangers posed to Europe by Putin's Russia, and the relative importance of stronger US military partners outside of the Asia Pacific.

Roy asserted that another challenge for PACOM is to deter adversaries and reassure friendly states in a "post-hegemonic" era, when the US is still powerful but no longer has complete military dominance in the region. In the recent past, allies might have construed a measured US response to provocation—Chinese intrusions in the South China Sea, for example—as appropriate and wise, he said. Today, by contrast, friendly governments might interpret US restraint as unwillingness to stand up to a stronger China. "Today the United States cannot stop aggression in the region without assuming some degree of risk," said Roy, "and our reluctance to take on risk can weaken confidence among our allies that America is fully committed to paying the price necessary to maintain regional security."

American allies may also be frustrated by changes in leadership at PACOM, Roy said. Commanders tend to change every two or three years, and each comes with a somewhat different approach to security issues in the region. Sometimes these variations are dramatic. In particular, the previous few PACOM commanders have swung back and forth between emphasizing engagement or confrontation with China.

These shifts in views are important, said Roy, because "the PACOM commander is a diplomat as well as a manager and strategist. A public

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statement by a PACOM commander can affect the confidence of allies or adversaries toward US power, the security policy of foreign governments, and even stock markets.”

Roy also commented on the inherent structural tensions between PACOM and the Pentagon, since PACOM commanders take orders from the Secretary of Defense, and priorities at the two levels of government can be quite different. “Pentagon decision-making is based on a global outlook and the occasional need to make difficult trade-offs,” according to Roy. “The Pentagon is deeply involved in US domestic political activities such as discussions with members of Congress, answering inquiries from citizen groups and the media, and managing the US defense budget.” Whereas PACOM, by definition, “is focused strictly on maintaining military security in the Asia Pacific region.”

Roy and others at the meeting commented on PACOM’s complex relationships with Japan, South Korea, and other allies in the region. Both PACOM and the Pentagon often urge US security partners to take a broader view of their own security and make a stronger contribution to the larger regional order. This is often a difficult sell, they said. Given current tensions on the Korean Peninsula, for example, it is understandable that the South

Koreans are focused exclusively on defending themselves. And because of the history of Japanese colonization, they are especially sensitive to the possibility that any security cooperation with Japan might bring Japanese troops onto Korean soil.

In Japan, US military bases on Okinawa spark local resentment, and persistent economic stagnation brings opposition to any significant increase in defense spending. Referring to Japan’s aging population, Brad Glosserman, Executive Director of the Center for Strategic and International Studies-affiliated Pacific Forum, suggested that the Japanese government is facing “a trade-off between guns vs. wheelchairs.”

Roy added that certain diplomatic activities by PACOM can help overcome anti-militarism among the Japanese population. “After PACOM personnel, ships, and aircraft carried out Operation Tomodachi to assist Japanese affected by the Tohoku triple disaster of 2011, opinion polls showed a marked increase in public support for Japan’s alliance with the United States,” Roy said.

There is broad interest among strategists in Japan, South Korea, and the US in developing a trilateral alliance, several speakers noted. On a practical level, cooperative activities are working well, according to Junya Nishino, Professor at Japan’s Keio University, “but the Japanese and

Korean governments must pay attention to their domestic audiences.”

Roy pointed out that “any possible alliance faces an inherent asymmetry of risk.” He postulated a conflict over two possible war plans: “Option A might promise greater and quicker assistance to South Korea but entail a higher expected risk that North Korea might fire a missile at Japan. Option B might be safer for Japan but less protective of South Korea. Close consultation could help ameliorate this kind of problem, but it cannot be completely eliminated because American, South Korean, and Japanese interests will never be perfectly aligned.”

In addition to managing complex relationships with American allies, PACOM needs to determine how best to stand up to China’s growing challenge to US dominance in the region, the speakers concluded. Rather than direct military confrontation, the US must respond to assertiveness in the “grey zone”—from construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea to a dramatic expansion of development activities in Pacific Island nations.

Japan Institute of International Affairs Senior Research Fellow Tetsuo Kotani asked, “Do Americans have the political will to confront China? The Chinese are betting that they don’t.” And America’s allies in the region are watching closely.



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