

POLITICS

U.S. Works Up New Effort to Shift Military's Focus to Asia

Officials, lawmakers cite a need for more resources, capabilities in the Pacific as China's ambitions grow



U.S. Marines watch the Navy's amphibious assault ship USS Wasp, carrying F-35 fighter jets, from the island of Luzon in the Philippines in April, during annual U.S.-Philippines military exercises. PHOTO: TED ALJIBE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Gordon Lubold

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WASHINGTON—U.S. defense strategy calls for retooling the military to better counter big powers, especially China, but the Pentagon still gives its Pacific military operations the short end of the budgetary stick, say many lawmakers, officials and experts.

The National Defense Strategy, released last year, names Beijing's military buildup and its "predatory economics" as major concerns. It is the latest U.S. initiative to focus on Asia after a Bush administration push starting in 2005 and the Obama administration's "pivot" beginning in 2011.

The Pentagon's Indo-Pacific Command, formerly known as Pacom, however, has seen little change to its force posture and remains essentially aligned as it has been since World War II, say analysts and critics of the arrangements inside and outside the military.

“If you ask, is U.S. Pacom being resourced adequately to implement the NDS, the answer to that question is no,” said a U.S. official, referring to Indo-Pacific Command, which oversees Asia. “You’re still not putting your money where your mouth is.”

China’s global ambitions and its military buildup over the years have triggered efforts by the U.S., including its military, to reposition itself to counter that expansion. China’s claims to a chain of islands, some man-made, in the South China Sea, and its development of bases overseas, such as in Djibouti, in East Africa, have pushed the U.S. to rethink how to counter Beijing.

But previous efforts, including the pivot to Asia under President Obama, stalled and lacked vigor and resources, according to critics. Though China hawks and others were bolstered by the creation of the National Defense Strategy, which prominently addresses China’s military ambitions, critics say that even under the new strategy, there hasn’t been a cohesive effort to realign resources commensurate with the strategy. As the Pentagon prepares its next budget, efforts to do so have sprouted anew.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper met at the Pentagon earlier this month with commanders from around the world, a gathering where officials began to grapple with how best to allocate military resources amid planning for the 2021 defense budget.

The U.S. Navy has taken some steps toward Asia recently, but Adm. Phil Davidson, who heads Indo-Pacific Command, said in a letter to lawmakers earlier this year that shortfalls in the region exist in ship-modernization funding and base and port construction projects.



Adm. Phil Davidson, left, head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, and Gen. Robert Abrams, commander of U.S. Forces Korea, testified during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing in February. **PHOTO: TOM WILLIAMS/ZUMA PRESS**

In response to questions from the House Armed Services Committee in March, Adm. Davidson said Indo-Pacific Command needs improvements to its submarine fleet, aircraft-carrier presence and Marine Corps amphibious groups to regain an edge over China’s fast-growing military.

The Pentagon's complicated budgeting process doesn't provide for comparisons between the military's six major geographic commands—the Pacific, the Middle East, Europe, Africa, North America and South America—which are allotted personnel, equipment and other resources out of the Defense Department's \$738 billion budget.

But the natural tensions among the varying commands are heightened by competing needs. U.S. commanders in the Middle East region, for instance, have sought more assets to respond to a spike in attacks blamed on Iran.

Indo-Pacific Command has never received funding from the supplemental pot of money set aside for what policy makers call overseas contingency operations, which account for \$2 trillion in funding spent on war operations since 2001.

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The bulk of that money has gone to the benefit of U.S. Central Command, which oversaw the war in Iraq and the fight against the Islamic State extremist group. In recent years, U.S. European Command has begun to receive some of the funding, through a program called the European Defense Initiative, to shore up security for Eastern Europe, even though the military command isn't technically at war.

No such fund exists for Indo-Pacific Command, which Mr. Esper has called “the priority theater,” critics said.

“Given China's large arsenal of advanced ballistic and cruise missiles and increasingly capable conventional strike forces, any conflict with China today would place U.S. forces at a distinct disadvantage,” Sen. Josh Hawley, (R., Mo.) in a letter to Mr. Esper Sept. 30 that was reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

“This is a major vulnerability that undermines the credibility of U.S. deterrence,” Mr. Hawley wrote.

The Indo-Pacific command needs less than 1% of the overall defense budget to be redirected annually for the next 10 years to fulfill its National Defense Strategy responsibilities, said Eric Sayers, a onetime aide to the former commander there. He compared Indo-Pacific Command to European Command, which oversees the threat from Russia, also singled out along with China, as



China's Liaoning aircraft carrier is accompanied by navy frigates and submarines conducting exercises in the South China Sea last year. PHOTO: LI GANG/ASSOCIATED PRESS

having new responsibilities under the defense strategy.

“That’s a small shift in resources, similar to what [European Command] has received the last six years, to reset the theater,” he said.

Other experts have said that while Indo-Pacific Command has never benefited directly from wartime funding, it has received the benefit of long-term investments focused on readiness and modernization.

“The long-term investments of the department are oriented against the things that Pacom is focused on, as they should be, given the national-defense strategy and given the way the secretary has prioritized them,” said a former senior military official. Attempts to get a funding mechanism dedicated to Indo-Pacific Command in the past have been unsuccessful, the former official said. That’s in part because it was hard to justify overseas contingency operations funding for a command not at war, the official said.

Mr. Esper has sought to bring new focus to China and to de-emphasize U.S. entanglements in the Middle East. He called for a larger American military presence in the Asia-Pacific region in a speech in Newport, R.I., in August, acknowledging the difficulty of balancing “near-term readiness versus future modernization.”

Mr. Esper’s senior military aide, Army Lt. Gen. Bryan Fenton, hails from Indo-Pacific Command, reinforcing the focus Mr. Esper’s aides say he has on the region.

Sen. Dan Sullivan (R., Alaska) said he added a provision to the 2019 defense-policy bill that requires the Pentagon to create a military posture in the Pacific in keeping with the new strategy.

Mr. Sullivan said that while the U.S. has made strides in this regard, the Pentagon’s force posture there is “stale” and is out of step with threats posed by China. “I have continually pressed this

issue with civilian and military leaders at the Pentagon, some of whom don't seem to recognize the problem," he said.

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