

# SPECIAL REPORT

A S P I

## US land power in the Indo-Pacific Opportunities for the Australian Army



Marcus Schultz

October 2023

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AUSTRALIAN  
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## About the authors

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Cover image: US Army floating causeway approaches the shore in Bowen, North Queensland, Australia, during exercise Talisman Sabre, marking the opening of Joint Logistics Over the Shore (JLOTS) activities which enables the movement of equipment, machinery and vehicles from vessel to shore. Defence image library, [online](#).



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# Executive summary

The US Army is undergoing its most consequential period of transformation since the end of the Cold War. The re-emergence of great-power competition and a deteriorating strategic environment are forcing the US Army to rethink not just its approach to land warfare but also its future role alongside the US Marine Corps (USMC) in key regions around the globe. Nowhere is this doctrinal and structural transformation more apparent and meaningful than in the Indo-Pacific—the geographical region linking Asia to Australia via the Southeast Asian archipelago<sup>1</sup>—where the People’s Republic of China (PRC) poses the most acute challenges.

The implementation of the US Army’s multi-domain operations (MDO) doctrine and reorganisation is informing a new approach to joint exercises and ‘no gaps’ defence collaboration to deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific. This transformation holds important insights for US allies and partners making it vital that the US supports its key allies, including Australia and Japan, to engage with the newly created multi-domain task forces (MDTFs). Continued close and proactive Australian defence engagement with the US defence establishment is also likely to be necessary to maintain the momentum provided by enhanced bilateral force posture cooperation as well as to counterbalance China’s destabilising activities in the region. Australia’s new unifying strategic approach to national defence necessitates that the Australian defence establishment and military leaders consider how institutional changes occurring within both the US Army and Australian Army facilitate new opportunities for the use of land power in a heightened threat environment.

# Policy recommendations

To leverage the opportunities that are being presented because of the multi-domain transformation of US land forces in the Indo-Pacific, the Australian Army should:

1. continue to increase local training with the Japan Self-Defense Forces designed for maritime operations and new US Army watercraft systems capabilities both in Northeast Asia and in our northern approaches, leveraging the Japan–Australia reciprocal access agreement (RAA) and joint statement on Australia – United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2023
2. continue to integrate with USMC marine littoral regiments (MLRs) by conducting simulated expeditionary advance base operations or missions tailored to Australia’s national defence and strategic interests; those exercises will help to build interoperability between army units operating medium and heavy littoral manoeuvre vessels
3. increase engagement with the US Army’s 1st and 3rd MDTFs to jointly operate hypersonics capabilities, including the long-range hypersonic weapon (LRHW) system, in Australia and develop mission sets that could support potential coalition combat operations in the Indo-Pacific.

In addition, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) should:

4. leverage the increasing convergence between the defence strategies of the US, Australia and Japan and incorporate anti-ship combat training into large-scale joint and bilateral exercises that enhance competencies in multi-domain warfare.

# Introduction

New initiatives to deepen the US–Australia alliance have followed in the wake of the 2020 Defence Strategic Update (DSU). The DSU tasks the ADF to be better prepared to support the US where Australia’s national interests are engaged.<sup>2</sup> The re-establishment of a bilateral force posture working group and renewed commitments to advance army-centric US force posture cooperation in Australia are driving changes that require a better understanding of what coalition activity entails. The Defence Strategic Review (DSR) released in April 2023 directs the Australian Army, as a core part of an integrated ADF, to focus on developing long-range fires and littoral manoeuvre capabilities to deny enemy encroachment into Australia’s northern approaches.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the high degree of convergence between US and Australian defence strategy offers a timely window of opportunity for the Australian Army to work more closely with US land forces. This work should be mutually reinforcing and constitute part of Australia’s approach to managing risk and threats and balancing its contributions to deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.

This report aims to provide the Australian defence establishment and military leaders with well-considered options for engaging the US on matters of mutual interest in the Indo-Pacific. The report provides an overview of the US Army’s changing force posture and approach to land warfare, followed by a brief analysis of its evolving role as an essential enabler of joint force operations in a maritime environment. The report then explores the US Army’s ‘campaigning’ activities in the Indo-Pacific and its efforts to increase allied and partner capacity for high-end military contingencies in all domains. Finally, the report highlights opportunities for the Australian Army to enhance interoperability with US land forces in a deepening US–Australia alliance. In highlighting these opportunities, the author recognises the limits of classification and publicly released information.



# The multi-domain transformation of US land forces

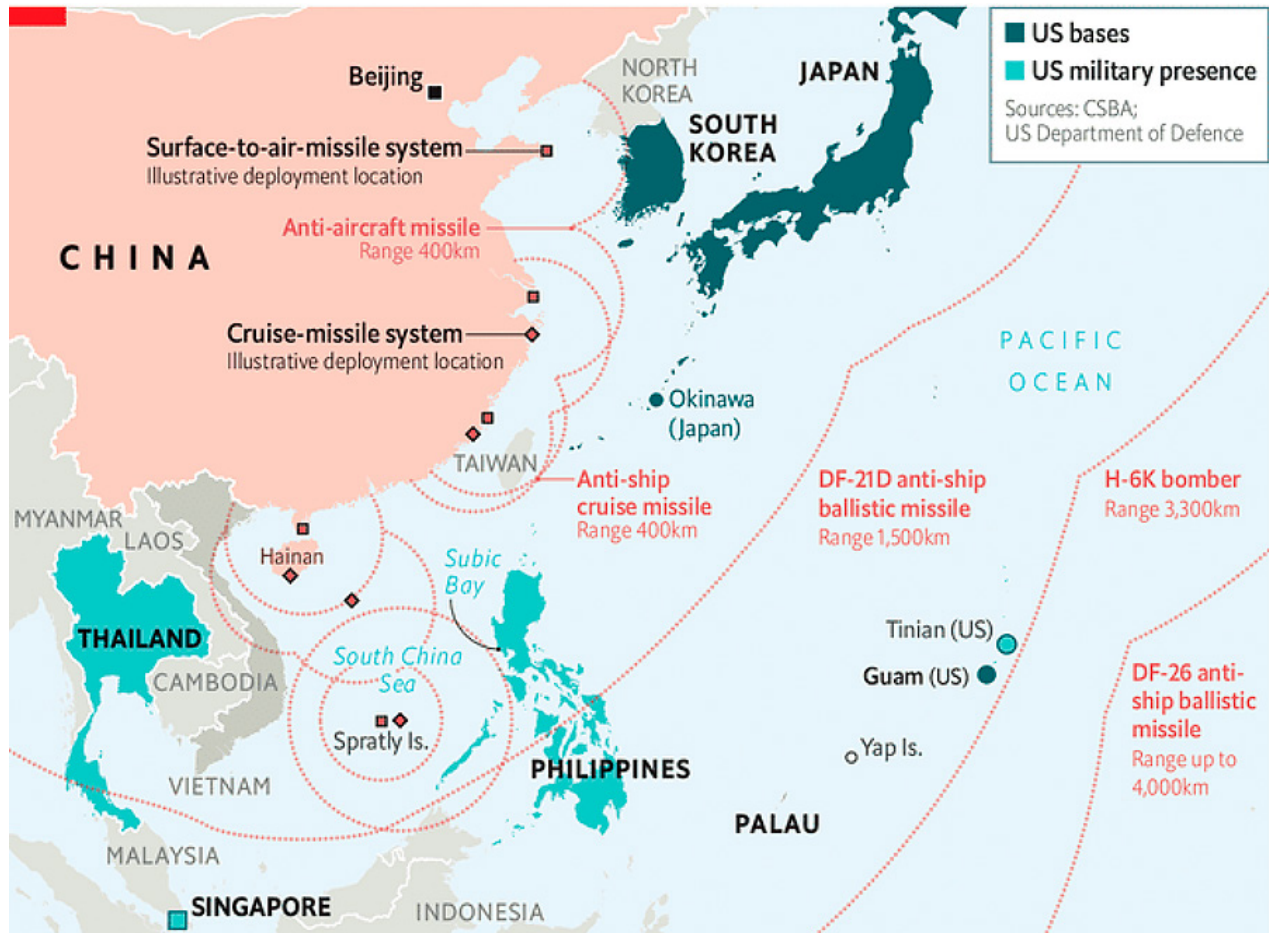
The US Army is undergoing reforms in both war-fighting doctrine and operational structure to ensure potential adversaries—like China and, to a lesser extent, Russia—can't outpace or outrange the joint force on future battlefields. On 10 October 2022, the US Army released an updated version of its MDO doctrine for conducting operations across the land, air, sea, space and cyber domains.<sup>4</sup> MDO is conceptually not new. It's partly an evolution of previous concepts such as AirLand battle, full spectrum operations and unified land operations, requiring the employment of long-range fires and non-kinetic capabilities against enemy air and missile defences.<sup>5</sup> MDO aims to ensure that US forces can expand the battlespace and achieve mission success without an assured ability to dominate in each individual domain.<sup>6</sup> Its codification has advanced changes that position the US Army as the key force that joint force commanders need to hold critical terrain, signal US commitment to allies and partners and defeat adversaries in close combat.<sup>7</sup> This shift accords with US expectations to deter aggression through denial, resilience, and direct and collective cost imposition<sup>8</sup> and acknowledges that US forces must operate in contested environments under constant contact in all domains.

Over the past decade, the PRC has built an anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capability to limit US power-projection operations within the first island chain, or failing that, to defeat US forces.<sup>9</sup> China's A2/AD capabilities include fourth-generation tactical aircraft and an array of high-precision missiles and ground and air defence systems, as shown in Figure 1 (next page).

China's A2/AD capabilities enhance Beijing's capacity to block opposing military actions, highlighting the criticality of both the US Army and the USMC in larger US plans to develop a more distributed force posture to counter that strategy and deter Chinese aggression.<sup>10</sup> According to the Commander of US Army Pacific (USARPAC) General Charles A Flynn, China's system of A2/AD capabilities 'is primarily designed to defeat air and maritime capabilities' and not to 'find, fix and finish mobile, networked, dispersed, reloadable ... land forces that are operating amongst their allies and partners'.<sup>11</sup> The ability of forward-deployed land forces to deter military aggression<sup>12</sup> reinforces the two distinct values that the US Army provides in a maritime theatre: supporting allies and partners, and enabling the joint force.<sup>13</sup> USARPAC envisions itself operating in concert with US allies and partners, projecting within enemy A2/AD systems and creating 'corridors for air, maritime and all-domain forces to exploit'.<sup>14</sup>

Expanding on this view, then Chief of Staff of the Army General James C McConville argued that the service must possess its own long-range precision fires, including hypersonic missiles, to penetrate enemy airspace.<sup>15</sup> This adaptation is key for US Army formations to fight as an 'inside force' within adversary A2/AD systems.<sup>16</sup> Once on the ground, Army forces would use physical, electronic and cyber means to harden and conceal sites against adversary attack and relocate frequently to avoid destruction.<sup>17</sup> By combining resiliency and mobility in this way, the US Army proposes to clear a path for air and naval assets conducting offensive attacks or transporting forces and equipment into theatre.<sup>18</sup> This vision has led to stepped-up efforts by USARPAC to diversify and distribute its forces throughout the Indo-Pacific.<sup>19</sup>

Figure 1: China's A2/AD capabilities



Source: Graphic produced by *The Economist*. Information provided by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and the US Department of Defence. 'America's top brass responds to the threat of China in the Pacific', *The Economist*, 11 March 2021, [online](#).

# US force posture and regional presence

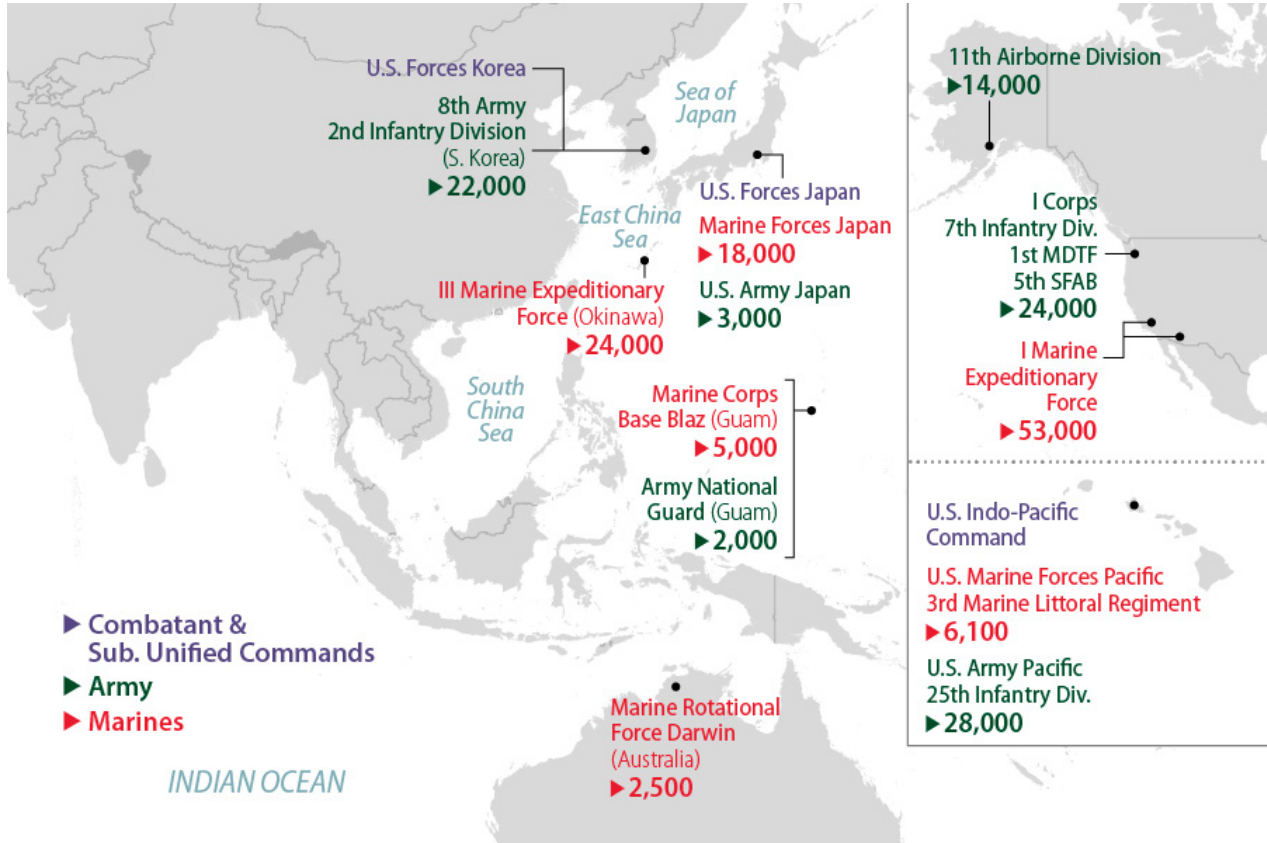
The US Army presence in the Indo-Pacific is largely consistent with America's Cold War-era force posture. The US Army maintains a concentration of forward-deployed forces in Japan, Korea and the Philippines,<sup>20</sup> which are primarily designed to conduct defensive operations close to garrison and serve as defensive tripwires. The US is now shifting its military approach to competition with the PRC from classic power projection towards increased forward presence and counterstrike and deterrence capabilities.<sup>21</sup> The more distributed US force posture in the Indo-Pacific is optimised for resilience, crisis escalation and greater responsiveness to conventional contingencies. New formations are equipped with advanced capabilities to mobilise precision fires, protect and sustain joint and friendly follow-on forces, provide sensors to shooters and conduct command-and-control. These changes help to ensure that the US is effectively and efficiently positioned in and around the Indo-Pacific to deal with the intensifying modalities of US–China competition.

The US Army currently has around 93,000 troops from one corps and two divisions assigned throughout the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) area of responsibility, which extends from Japan and Korea to Alaska and Hawaii.<sup>22</sup> This posture includes some 55,000 service personnel forward stationed throughout the region, including one infantry division headquartered in Hawaii; 22,000 soldiers stationed in Korea; 3,000 soldiers located at Camp Zama in Japan; and 2,000 soldiers based in Guam. USARPAC has enhanced this operational footprint through its specialty MDTFs and security force assistance brigades (SFABs), as shown in Figure 2 (next page).

MDTFs are theatre-level elements that support joint all domain operations by contesting aggression and conducting the initial penetration of enemy long-range systems from inside A2/AD zones.<sup>23</sup> The 1st MDTF and 3rd MDTF, established in 2017 and 2022, respectively, consist of approximately 3,000 soldiers organised in four main elements: a strategic fires battalion; an air defence battalion; a brigade support battalion; and an intelligence, information, cyber, electronic warfare and space battalion.<sup>24</sup> These formations are in such high demand by combatant commands that then Chief of Army General James McConville intended to deploy an additional MDTF to the Indo-Pacific.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to the US Army's posture and regional presence, the USMC has an estimated 49,500 forward-deployed forces in the Indo-Pacific, including 18,000 personnel headquartered in mainland Japan; 24,000 expeditionary forces based in Okinawa; 5,000 personnel stationed at Camp Blaz in Guam; and 2,500 personnel on rotation to Australia as part of Marine Rotational Force—Darwin (MRF-D), as shown in Figure 2. This posture is supported by the 3rd MLR established in 2020; any future rotational forces are likely to be supported by two additional MLRs envisaged to be operating by 2030. The new MLRs consist of approximately 2,000 Marines organised in three main elements: a littoral combat team, a littoral anti-air battalion and a littoral logistics battalion.<sup>26</sup> The USMC will repurpose its 12th Artillery Regiment into the 12th MLR in Okinawa by fiscal year 2025 and plans to transfer the 4th Marine Regiment from Okinawa to Guam, where it could serve as the basis of a third MLR beginning in 2027.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 2: major US headquarters and US land forces in and around the Indo-Pacific



Note: numbers of personnel associated with locations and units are approximate and include additional units not depicted in Figure 2. Source: Graphic produced by CRS Graphics. Congressional Research Service, 'US land forces in the Indo-Pacific: background and issues for Congress', CRS report R47096, August 2022, 8, [online](#).

To provide these new capabilities, the USMC is instituting a major force design initiative known as *Force Design 2030*. The USMC is divesting itself of lower priority capabilities or those replicating existing capability provided by the other services. This reform agenda has its critics. Retired Lieutenant General Paul K Van Riper, for instance, argues that, by giving up its combined arms capability to support sea denial by firing anti-ship missiles, the USMC 'will be a force shorn of all its tanks and 76% of its cannon artillery ... with 41% fewer Marines in its infantry battalions' and '33% fewer aircraft available to support riflemen on the ground'.<sup>28</sup> In reality, most reductions in legacy capabilities have been matched by an addition of new capabilities, such as precision strike regimes, uncrewed systems and resilient command-and-control networks.<sup>29</sup> The redesigned USMC will be a lighter and faster force more capable of doing everything from electronic warfare to sinking ships at sea,<sup>30</sup> and more likely to pose an unavoidable obstacle to enemy actions. While these USMC innovations are in many ways closely aligned to the DSR strategy and approach, the US Army is becoming ever more relevant as a model to contend with the future character of war that will include long-range strike, coercive strategies and a focus on maritime operations.

The Australian Army is closely focused on interoperability and developments within US land forces because it has both capabilities and responsibilities that in the US system reside in the US Army or the USMC. Our Army must think about force generation, capability, posture and logistics differently from either the US Army or USMC because of this vital difference. It's therefore worth considering what new opportunities the US Army reforms create for closer cooperation with the Australian Army.

# The US Army's evolving role in the Indo-Pacific

The US Army's transformational reforms and developing land-power network stand out as crucial elements of a push to accrue strategic advantage amid increasing uncertainty in the US–China relationship. These changes fill a gap by disrupting an adversary's ability to amass combat power and generate local superiority and by extending the range at which friendly forces can expose high-value targets to effective attack. This has created space for the US Army to bring its greater size and firepower to bear in the Indo-Pacific. Both these factors are addressed in the US Army's Chief of Staff paper, *Army multi-domain transformation: ready to win in competition and conflict*, released in March 2021. The new vision paper sees land forces seizing the role to 'decisively shape the first battle by leveraging positional and capability advantage to rapidly deliver options for crisis response, and to win'.<sup>31</sup> To achieve that vision, the US Army is taking steps to up-end the longstanding tradition of deploying to a contested theatre from the continental US over many months.<sup>32</sup> The focus now is to hold adversary interests at risk, assure allies of US commitments in the region and enable joint manoeuvre when deterrence, de-escalation, and cost imposition fail in a crisis.<sup>33</sup> This shift has advanced the use of MDTFs to address these functions at scale.

MDTFs are an integral part of the US Army's push to shape the theatre during competition. MDTFs have been designed and equipped to provide joint force commanders with a 'multi-domain theatre screen force' that gains and maintains contact with the adversary.<sup>34</sup> In competition and crisis, MDTFs secure and leverage advantageous attacking positions from which to conduct information operations that expose malign behaviour and counter coercive activities.<sup>35</sup> As Major General Joel B Vowell and Major Kevin Joyce argue, situating an MDTF in the first island chain would greatly 'minimise China's advantage of interior lines and present its leaders with multiple dilemmas'.<sup>36</sup> 'Interior lines' are compact lines of manoeuvre, communications and logistics that undergird operational endurance by positioning foundational protection, collection, command-and-control and sustainment needed during conflict.<sup>37</sup>

In conflict, MDTFs would be placed to survive an initial strike and manoeuvre overland to sustain long-range fires against high-value enemy targets.<sup>38</sup> Their wartime function is to allow friendly and follow-on joint forces to safely manoeuvre into theatre by mobilising precision fires, protecting and sustaining joint force formations, providing sensors and conducting command-and-control.<sup>39</sup> In accordance with this mission, the 1st MDTF has practised its ability to both deploy and employ the US Army's first LRHW system.<sup>40</sup> Properly integrated, this capability is likely to increase the relative impact of MDTFs in any given live-fire scenario by being difficult for radars to track and compressing the decision-making space regarding interception. The US Army will deploy its 1st and 3rd MDTFs to more than 15 major joint military exercises in eight countries over 2023.<sup>41</sup> It's critical that these MDTFs clearly demonstrate their ability to support shared objectives to gain acceptance as a welcome feature of a more resilient Indo-Pacific security architecture. Until MDTFs are tested during a crisis, however, it will remain unclear whether MDTFs can shorten the lines of movement and communication enough to provide follow-on joint and friendly forces with an overwhelming advantage.

Overall, these developments hold important insights for US allies and partners, making it vital that the US supports its key allies, including Japan and Australia, to build on initial engagement with the newly created MDTFs and the concepts underpinning the regional balance of power. This task should not be a one-sided affair. Australia and Japan should equally be developing and contributing novel concepts that explore the potential applications of disruptive technologies in US concepts for strategic competition.



# US concepts for strategic competition with China and the US Army's approach to campaigning

In March 2022, the Pentagon released an unclassified fact sheet that introduced the concepts of 'integrated deterrence' and 'campaigning' as means to undermine acute forms of competitor coercion that impinge on American national interests.<sup>42</sup> Integrated deterrence involves shoring up capability gaps and forging stronger links with allies to instil in adversaries the expectation that military aggression will be met with a collective response.<sup>43</sup> Campaigning entails peacetime military activities that limit, frustrate and disrupt competitor activities that challenge US military advantage to shape the environment to the benefit of the US and its allies and partners.<sup>44</sup> Campaigning supports the Biden administration's concept of integrated deterrence (see box).

## Integrated deterrence through campaigning

This conceptualisation begins from the classical assumption that the power to deter rests on the guaranteed and clearly understood ability of the US to respond to aggression. It's the 'way' of US strategy in the Indo-Pacific, joining the sweep of US capabilities and operations in traditional and new domains in peacetime as necessary for the US to deter aggression and prevail in conflict when necessary.<sup>45</sup>

Campaigning is the 'means' by which the kind of deterrence that's credible, flexible and formidable enough to give an adversary pause can be achieved. According to Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen H Hicks, campaigning involves US forces operating with allies and partners to demonstrate a combined capacity and ability to respond to military aggression.<sup>46</sup> Put simply, campaigning seeks to strengthen deterrence by operationalising US and allied war-fighting concepts that advance US strategic objectives and expanding vertically expectations for defence cooperation and war.

There's a distinct difference between the wartime theatre campaign plans of the past and what's meant by campaigning. Campaign plans specify how the US Army will operate to achieve military objectives,<sup>47</sup> whereas 'campaigning' refers to military activities occurring before conflict that remain responsive to changing strategic conditions and policy objectives.<sup>48</sup> Campaigning differs from campaign plans by distinguishing between aspects of campaigning through cooperation, adversarial competition below armed conflict and armed conflict. Its use overcomes the peace-war binary and places the emphasis on combating coercive behaviour using latent, rather than active, military power.<sup>49</sup> Campaigning seeks to generate long-term strategic advantage for the US and its partners in the Indo-Pacific through indirect actions in response to rapid changes in the political, diplomatic and strategic environment.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, a better understanding of the strategic implications of US Army campaigning activities is necessary.

US Army leadership envisions pre-positioning more US Army troops and equipment throughout the Indo-Pacific and building coalitions as means to complicate China's decision-making. As Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth told an audience in Washington in March, the US Army intends to commit more combat credible forces to the region and build theatre distribution centres in Guam and potentially Australia, Japan and the Philippines.<sup>51</sup> If it's successful, the US Army would be able to support other forces by providing logistical hubs in the region. This change stands in contrast to previous efforts to build 'a continental United States-based expeditionary Army that retains the ability to conduct sustained land operations'.<sup>52</sup> USARPAC is focusing its efforts on building interior lines through two primary campaigning activities.

## In-theatre sustainment rehearsals

The first effort involves conducting in-theatre sustainment rehearsals to increase joint readiness and enhance allied and partner capacity to deny human and geographical terrain to an adversary.<sup>53</sup> In 2019, for example, as many as 10,000 soldiers deployed to areas surrounding the South China Sea, bolstering the large number of troops already rotating through partner countries as part of the Pacific Pathways and Defender Pacific programs.<sup>54</sup> The successor to those programs—Operation Pathways—normalises the presence and practise of multi-domain capabilities and doctrine with US allies and partners.<sup>55</sup> Operation Pathways represents USARPAC's topline contribution to this effort by reorienting large-scale joint and bilateral exercises towards responses during high-end conflict.<sup>56</sup> Evidence of this vertical expansion of patterns of cooperation reflects changes to Exercise Orient Shield. In 2022, for instance, the 1st MDTF visited Japan for the first time and held anti-ship combat training with the host country's new land-based electronic warfare unit.<sup>57</sup> This exercise built on the success of the previous iteration, which brokered the execution of MDO that included live and virtual aspects of bilateral targeting, lethal long-range precision fires, guard and protect missions, joint watercraft system movement and aviation operations.<sup>58</sup>

Other key exercises in the Indo-Pacific have undergone similar reframing with emphasis on high-end military contingencies in all domains. For example, MDO and sensor-to-shooter exercises are now a core part of multilateral wargames such as the US Army's Project Convergence. Project Convergence incorporates MDTF functions and requirements to test the US Army's integration into the 'expanded battlefield' aspect of the Pentagon's broader joint all-domain command and control (JADC2) concept.<sup>59</sup> The war games improve decision-making speed and quality to ensure that JADC2-derived courses of action will deliver decisive outcomes on the battlefield.<sup>60</sup> British and Australian troops participated in the wargames in 2022 and demonstrated how the different services and militaries might fight against Chinese forces in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>61</sup> This kind of strategic collaboration also works to assure US allies and partners that increased US military involvement in the region maximises momentum and opportunities to deter aggression.<sup>62</sup>

## Army pre-positioned stocks and leveraging of SFAB operations

The second line of effort involves the establishment of Army pre-positioned stocks and leveraging of SFAB operations. SFABs were created to assist partner forces with non-traditional security tasks and training gaps.<sup>63</sup> These mission sets allow SFABs to play an outsized role in the Indo-Pacific, where the US military has traditionally lacked pre-conflict access agreements. The US Army is cognisant of the risks that a lack of access poses in a crisis and is refocusing SFAB objectives towards combat responses to reinforce deterrence. In 2021, for example, the 5th SFAB joined the 1st Brigade Combat Team and the 99th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army to conduct subject-matter expert exchanges to increase interoperability across the full spectrum of military operations.<sup>64</sup> This evolution in the US Army's approach to combat advising holds out the promise that SFABs can provide partner countries with attractive and cost-effective options in irregular warfare contexts.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, all SFABs now train to operate with foreign security forces in the context of scenario-driven missions during simulated conflict.<sup>66</sup> These SFABs will also soon conduct exercises to test for security cooperation continuity with partner countries that currently don't host US land forces.

The presence of MDTFs in allied countries, such as the Philippines, could facilitate new modes of security cooperation that reinforce deterrence in the first island chain. The US Army is poised to gain access to Camp Melchor F dela Cruz in the country's north, after Washington and Manila agreed in April to expand the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement.<sup>67</sup> President Ferdinand Marcos Jr has made it clear that Philippines bases would not be used by the US as 'staging areas' for offensive action against any country.<sup>68</sup> However, MDTFs organised for air defence and intelligence gathering may prove to be an exception to that rule. If permitted to rotate to strategic sites throughout the Philippines, the MDTFs could be used to fortify regional deterrence efforts against China's destabilising activities in the South China Sea and generate solutions to the problem of operating inside China's defensive A2/AD zones.

The US adoption of integrated deterrence places much greater emphasis on alliance modernisation and return on investments in force posture and deeper military interoperability.<sup>69</sup> Australia has a strategic interest in supporting US efforts to adapt its forward military posture to bolster deterrence in Southeast Asia, including through Canberra's own defence engagement in the region. It's important therefore that Australia's engagements with the US on matters of mutual interest are well-considered and appropriately calibrated. This task is made more necessary given the public release of the DSR and its implications for the Australian Army.<sup>70</sup>

# Australia's strategic shift and new prospects for interchangeability

The 2020 DSU and 2023 DSR state that Australia's immediate region is the primary area of strategic interest and military planning. The DSU defined the immediate region as the area 'ranging from the north-eastern Indian Ocean, through maritime and mainland South East Asia to Papua New Guinea and the South West Pacific'.<sup>71</sup> Supplanting this definition, the DSR described the immediate region as 'encompassing the north-eastern Indian Ocean through maritime Southeast Asia into the Pacific, including our northern approaches'.<sup>72</sup> The removal of the reference to mainland Southeast Asia and attention to Australia's northern approaches is noteworthy, particularly as new force structure priorities mean the Australian Army will be 'transformed and optimised for littoral manoeuvre operations by sea, land and air from Australia, with enhanced long-range fires'.<sup>73</sup> This planned and ongoing optimisation creates opportunities for deepening the US–Australia alliance in the land domain, particularly as the heightened focus on the immediate region implies that Australia's land-force contributions will be in archipelagic Southeast Asia, and of a maritime and amphibious quality.

The DSR is 'strongly aligned' with the 2022 US National Defense Strategy (NDS).<sup>74</sup> Like the NDS, the DSR emphasises deterrence by denial and the employment of capabilities and courses of action to prevent military miscalculation from escalating into conflict. To achieve that goal, the DSR asks the Australian Army to contribute to 'a more focused force' by way of 'a fully enabled, integrated amphibious-capable combined-arms land system'.<sup>75</sup> The Australian Army will thus trade the acquisition of infantry fighting vehicles and a planned second regiment of self-propelled howitzers for the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) land-based strike capability and rapidly acquire more littoral manoeuvre vessels (LMVs).<sup>76</sup> This trade-off reflects, according to Australian strategic studies scholar Adam Lockyer, an intention to 'send the army forward to deny the sea, air and land to opponents far from Australia's own coastline'.<sup>77</sup> This intention highlights a key weakness of the DSR, which is that the kind of capabilities Canberra would probably need to defend the Australian continent against direct attack would not be best suited to contributing to US-led multinational coalitions across the Indo-Pacific.<sup>78</sup> Australia's defence strategy rightly prioritises our national defence, but this does raise questions about the capacity of an integrated ADF to meet the future strategic needs of the alliance.

Army-centric US force posture cooperation in Australia is gathering pace. Following AUSMIN 2022, the US Defense Secretary and Australian Defence Minister endorsed plans to strengthen US land presence in Australia and expand locations for US Army and USMC forces 'to enable exercises, activities, and further opportunities for regional engagement, including in the context of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) support to the region'.<sup>79</sup> Some observers have interpreted this ramping up of US military presence in Australia as fulfilling a 'no gaps' alliance to deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>80</sup> The DSR reaffirms the importance of the US–Australia alliance and, as Chief of Army Lieutenant General Simon Stuart has stated, requires the Australian Army to meet changed government expectations as well as the needs of Australia's allies and partners.<sup>81</sup> Considering how a transformed and multi-domain capable Australian Army should work with US land forces to deter conflict during competition and crisis is, therefore, crucial.

There's nothing in the DSR that suggests Australia should aim to hold at risk potential targets in mainland China. However, that option is also not explicitly ruled out—collapsing any substantive distinction between deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment.<sup>82</sup> This vernacular creates incentives for the Australian Army to increase its familiarisation with the testing and deployment of hypersonic missiles. As retired Major General Mick Ryan argues, the most useful deterrents strike close to an adversary's home.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the Pentagon is reportedly considering testing American hypersonic weapons in Australia under the AUKUS agreement.<sup>84</sup> Expanding on existing successful hypersonics cooperation between the US and Australia<sup>85</sup> by positioning jointly operated hypersonics capabilities in Australia would send a purposeful signal to Beijing. This would make clear that Australia possesses a deterrence capability at a range to defend Australia and our northern approaches and support US military operations in the South China Sea and East Asia.

This position will have its detractors, in part owing to the high unit cost of hypersonic missiles.<sup>86</sup> Some commentators note that the difficulty of logistically supporting the delivery system on small island locations will make it unlikely the capability can be made available in sufficient numbers to change the PRC's strategic calculus.<sup>87</sup> That challenge may be overcome with rapid launch available from Australia. And, while the LRHW system is still years away from being deemed a proven system, having a clearly defined and cost-effective mission would help to improve prospects for enhanced US–Australia military interchangeability during competition and reinforce deterrence in the event of a regional crisis.<sup>88</sup> The extent to which the US and Australia cooperate on hypersonics will directly inform perceptions in Beijing about the attendant risks of military aggression and likelihood of a collective response. It follows that deep cooperation on hypersonics would provide a credible capability for Australia's national defence as well as any potential coalition combat operations in the Indo-Pacific. Given that neither the US nor Australia can deter the PRC alone, the Australian Army and USARPAC should investigate ways to jointly employ, deploy and logistically support the LRHW system.

Littoral manoeuvre and logistics training is another priority area where the Australian Army could further cooperate with US Army MDTFs and USMC MLRs. Australia's amphibious force will expand over the next decade with the addition of new LMVs through Land Project 8710. Phase 1 will see the introduction of 18 steel-hulled LMV-M (medium) vessels from 2026.<sup>89</sup> Those vessels will have a range of 1,200 nautical miles at a speed of 15 knots, be able to sustain all-seas operations up to 10-days in a variety of conditions and be capable of accommodating wheeled and tracked vehicles. Phase 2 will see a number of LMV-H (heavy) vessels, capable of carrying tanks or infantry fighting vehicles over longer distances, developed in the future. From 2024, the planned Australian Army littoral lift groups operating LMV-Ms and LMV-Hs in support of training and operations in the Northern Territory, northern Queensland and southeast Queensland could benefit from exercising with USMC MLRs in simulated expeditionary advance base operations or missions tailored to Australia's national defence and strategic interests.<sup>90</sup> Either way, increased interoperability could bolster Australian efforts to build an integrated maritime strategic construct.<sup>91</sup> For this opportunity to occur, the Australian Government will need to work together with our state and territory governments to fast track the establishment of new army watercraft bases in northern Australia.<sup>92</sup> This work is especially critical given the joint statement on AUSMIN 2023, which announced an intent to rotate US Army watercraft in Australia.<sup>93</sup>

Building on this development, the Australian Army continues to increase local training with the Japan Self-Defense Forces designed for maritime operations and with the new US Army watercraft systems capabilities in our northern approaches. These systems provide logistical support to thousands of established ports and unimproved beaches and help with intra-theatre lift and over-the-shore operational manoeuvre.<sup>94</sup> In 2020, Army watercraft systems were part of essential assistance to the joint manoeuvre of the logistics support vessel *Lt General William B Bunker*.<sup>95</sup> This advancement provided a proof of concept for efforts including the deployment of the HIMARS to an island within the second island chain, experimentation of beyond-line-of-sight targeting and redeployment of MRF-D assets to Japan.<sup>96</sup> Alongside this year's Talisman Sabre exercise, Army watercraft systems capabilities demonstrated the US Army's progress in treating logistics as a war-fighting function and manoeuvring pre-positioned stocks from the Korean Peninsula to Australia.<sup>97</sup> Opportunities for the Australian Army to explore broader cooperation are plentiful. The US–Australia–Japan minilateral relationship offers many opportunities for expanded exercises and deployments now the Japan–Australia RAA is in effect.<sup>98</sup> The increasing convergence between the defence strategies of all three countries also augurs well for future cooperation regarding the landpower component of littoral manoeuvre.

Lastly, the Australian defence establishment and military leaders should consider what more can be done to increase our preparedness and readiness for a regional contingency involving the US and China. As the 2020 DSU noted, Australia can no longer rely on a decade's warning time for conventional conflict.<sup>99</sup> Washington's interest in forward-basing more of its strike assets in Australia is now more than underpinned by a pressing need for the ADF to enact a strategy of denial in our immediate region. Incremental steps are being taken to strengthen the US–Australia alliance. For instance, Australia and the US have agreed to allow the US Army to practise transporting supplies to Bandiana in Victoria following Exercise Talisman Sabre 2023 as a precursor to the establishment of a permanent



logistics support area in Queensland.<sup>100</sup> These are welcome developments that should exist alongside other efforts to pre-position US Army stocks intended for use during combat missions at ADF bases in Australia's north and northwest. The growing threat environment demands a forward-leaning approach. As US Army Colonel Todd C Hanks argues, a full US Army brigade combat team equipment set positioned in the northern part of Australia would support both US and Australian national interests and additional actions to deter the PRC from escalating to armed conflict.<sup>101</sup> While this avenue might not be a decisive factor in Beijing's strategic calculus on its own, it's a natural fit with the DSR and could bolster the capacity of an integrated ADF to effect a strategy of denial.<sup>102</sup> At the very least, it would enhance the Australian Army's ability to develop interchangeability and leverage US Army stocks in the country in the event of a regional crisis.

# Conclusion

Both Washington and Canberra recognise the key role that land forces will play in reinforcing deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. Recent strategic policy shifts have resulted in institutional reforms to the US Army, the USMC and the Australian Army. USARPAC envisions operating forward in concert with allies and partners during competition and crisis and maintaining contact with the adversary inside opposing A2/AD systems. US Army campaigning activities emphasise building coalitions to complicate China's decision-making and pre-position more US troops and equipment throughout the Indo-Pacific. This change involves expanding patterns of defence cooperation and large-scale joint and bilateral exercises to include responses to high-end military contingencies in all domains. Should deterrence fail to prevent conflict with the PRC, US Army MDTFs and USMC MLRs will be poised to impose significant costs on Chinese forces. While there will always be a need for armies to seize and defend land, as the war in Ukraine demonstrates, the transformation of land power in the Indo-Pacific holds opportunities for the Australian Army and US land forces to cooperate in novel ways, and in partnership. Amid increasing uncertainty, it's paramount that the Australian Army, the US Army and the USMC prioritise the development of a shared understanding of coalition activity in a heightened threat environment.

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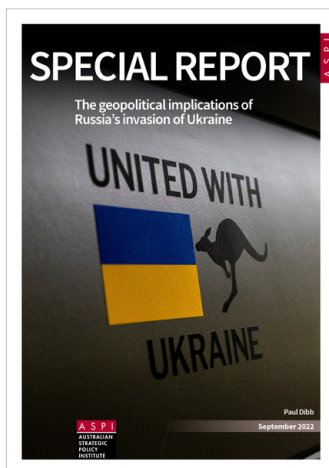
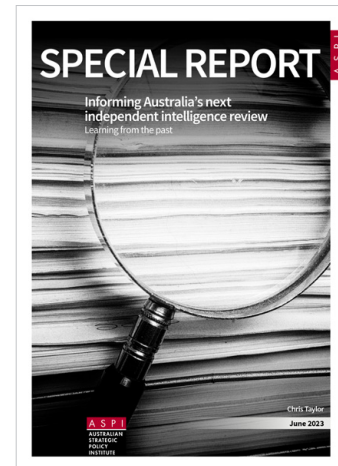
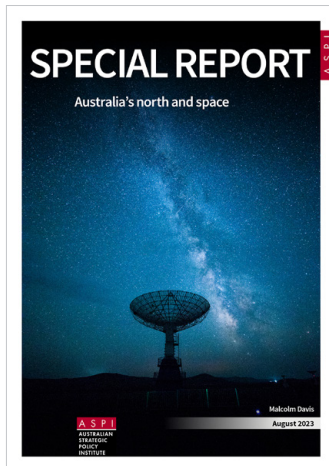
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# Acronyms and abbreviations

A2/AD	anti-access/area-denial
ADF	Australian Defence Force
AUSMIN	Australia – United States Ministerial Consultations
DSR	Defence Strategic Review (Australia)
DSU	Defence Strategic Update (Australia)
HADR	humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
HIMARS	High Mobility Artillery Rocket System
INDOPACOM	Indo-Pacific Command (US)
JADC2	joint all-domain command and control
LMV	littoral manoeuvre vessel
LRHW	long-range hypersonic weapon
MDO	multi-domain operations
MDTF	multi-domain task force
MLR	marine littoral regiment
MRF-D	Marine Rotational Force—Darwin
NDS	National Defense Strategy (US)
PRC	People's Republic of China
RAA	reciprocal access agreement (Japan–Australia)
SFAB	Security Force Assistance Brigade
USARPAC	United States Army Pacific
USMC	United States Marine Corps

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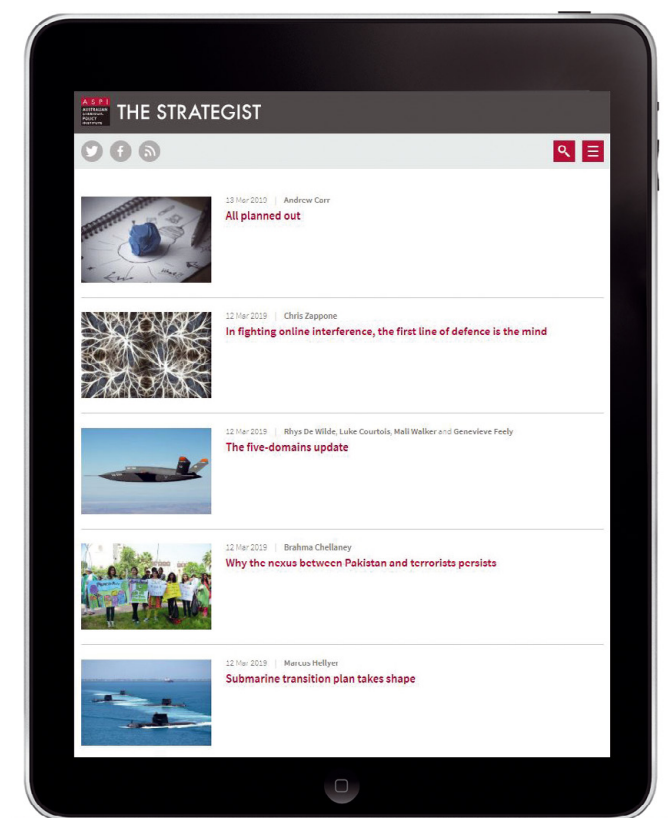


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**US land power in the Indo-Pacific**  
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