

PACOM and the Pentagon¹

March 2017

Denny Roy

Senior Fellow, East-West Center, Honolulu

This working paper is part of the security cluster outcomes of the Keio University project “Enhancing Sustainability of Global Society through Jitsugaku (Science),” which is a “Top Global University Project” of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

The commander of the United States Pacific Command, or PACOM, is often called the “second most powerful man in the world,” the first being the President of the United States. PACOM is the largest of the US military’s regional “combatant commands,” encompassing half of the surface of the earth. PACOM and the other combatant commands sometimes draw criticism for being too autonomous and too powerful—by one assessment, “the modern-day equivalent of the Roman Empire’s proconsuls.”² Historian Richard Kohn argued in 2002 that “the regional commanders have come to assume such importance in their areas – particularly in the Pacific, the Middle East, and Central Asia – that they have effectively displaced American ambassadors and the State Department as the primary instruments of American foreign policy.”³ The following year, *Washington Post* investigative journalist Dana Priest argued that since the 1990s, the generals and admirals leading the regional combatant commands had surpassed US ambassadors, intelligence agencies and corporations in the shaping of US foreign policy and in wielding global influence by “the sheer weight of their budgets and heft of political authority handed to them by the White House and the Pentagon.”⁴ Such assessments suggest PACOM has outgrown the control of its formal supervisory organization, the Office of the Secretary of Defense located in the Pentagon. In fact, the relationship between PACOM and the Pentagon is complicated. PACOM does indeed have considerable authority and

¹ This paper is based on interviews with US government military and civilian officials in December 2016. The author agreed to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.

² Dana Priest, “A Four-Star Foreign Policy? US Commanders Wield Rising Clout, Autonomy,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 28, 2000, p. A1.

³ Richard H. Kohn, 2002, “The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States Today,” *Naval War College Review*, 2002, vol. LV, no. 3.

⁴ Dana Priest, 2003, *The Mission: Waging War and Keeping Peace with America’s Military* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003) pp. 42, 71.

autonomy, but senior PACOM officers could quickly point out ways the Pentagon constrains them, often to PACOM's frustration.

In US military terms, PACOM is a "unified combatant command." It is "unified" because it includes forces from multiple US military services (the US Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines). "Combatant command" refers to the system of dividing up the world into "areas of responsibility" (AORs). As a superpower, the United States is prepared to employ military force in any part of the globe. To manage this huge undertaking, the US government has established separate command structures over specific geographic areas. PACOM is the combatant command with the Asia-Pacific region as its AOR. There are separate combatant commands for North America (NORTHCOM), Central and South America (SOUTHCOM), Europe (EUCOM), Africa (AFRICOM), and the Middle East (CENTCOM, for "Central Command"). The premise underlying this collection of regional combatant commands is respect for geography: different parts of the globe have unique challenges and opportunities requiring specialized familiarity by the commanders of the forces that operate in them. There are also three combatant commands that are functional rather than geographic: Special Forces Command (SOCOM), Strategic Command (STRATCOM), and Transportation Command (TRANSCOM).

The concept of regional combatant commands with AORs encompassing the territory of other countries as well as international sea and air space is unique to a superpower. To better understand this approach to national security, Japanese might consider the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's (JMSDF) practice of dividing the area around Japan into several military districts. The US system of regional commands applies the same practice on a global scale.

Because the Asia-Pacific AOR is mostly maritime, the PACOM commander has always been a US Navy admiral since PACOM was established in 1946. During World War II, which heavily influenced subsequent US strategic thinking, the US Navy emerged as the main actor in the Pacific Theater of US operations, with the Army in a supporting role. (By contrast, the commanders of US Forces Korea have all been US Army generals because a war in Korea would primarily be ground combat supported by air and naval forces.) In 2004, the Secretary of Defense nominated US Air Force General Gregory S. Martin to be the next PACOM commander in what would have been a break from the pattern of Navy admirals holding that position. Martin withdrew his nomination, however, after tough questioning from Senator John S. McCain (a former Navy captain whose father, a Navy admiral, had been PACOM commander) about Martin's possible connections with a corruption scandal involving the acquisition of tanker aircraft for the US military. In addition to a US Navy admiral traditionally holding the position of commander, funding for the PACOM headquarters in Honolulu comes out of the US Navy budget.

Not surprisingly, PACOM is dominated by naval culture. This is a departure from most Asian countries, where the army is traditionally the dominant service. It is a point of commonality, however, with Japan, which has a strong naval tradition and a navy that is currently the most capable of its military services.

The PACOM commander is in large part a diplomat in addition to being a manager and strategist. A public 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. There is disagreement within the US government over how much effort PACOM should focus on diplomacy as opposed to preparing to win wars. Some foreign governments and members of the US Congress want PACOM to apply most of its energy to war-fighting. Others want PACOM to provide reassurance to allies and even to potential adversaries. Delivering humanitarian relief after natural disasters has become a major PACOM activity. Humanitarian operations increase regional support for US leadership and strengthen bilateral relations between Washington and the recipient governments. This is an example of PACOM's military forces harnessed to serve strategic but non-military objectives. 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 the Japanese people's support for Japan's alliance with the United States.⁵ Similarly, the US government's relationship with Jakarta improved after PACOM led a humanitarian assistance mission to Indonesia after the December 2004 tsunami.⁶

Biggest is Not Necessarily Most Prestigious

Where PACOM ranks in importance among the various regional combatant commands from the point of view of Washington is somewhat uncertain. Some long-serving US officials remember that Europe was the highest priority strategic theater during the Cold War and see PACOM as having risen in priority to become the most important and prestigious of the regional commands within the US military bureaucracy. Other US officials, however, believe PACOM is not nor has ever been the highest priority of the regional combatant commands. PACOM has potential disadvantages compared to the other regional combatant commands managed by the Pentagon.

The Asia-Pacific region's great distance from Washington creates a natural tendency for it to get less of the Pentagon's attention. Because of the different time zones, the workdays of the Pentagon and PACOM only overlap

⁵ Grace Ruch, "Dawn of the 'Tomodachi Generation'? Polls Show Historic Support for US-Japan Relationship," Dec. 22, 2011, *Asia Matters for America*, East-West Center-Washington, <<http://www.asiamattersforamerica.org/japan/polls-show-historic-support-for-us-japan-relationship>>.

⁶ Andrew Kohut, Carroll Doherty, and Richard Wike, "No Global Warming Alarm in the U.S., China," Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 13, 2006, Washington, DC, <<http://www.pewglobal.org/files/pdf/252.pdf>>.

by two or three hours (the difference varies because during part of the year the US mainland observes daylight saving time).

America's Asia-Pacific allies arguably contribute less to joint operations with the US military than allies in other regional combatant command areas (such as NATO partners or the US-backed governments in Afghanistan and Iraq). The activities of Japanese and South Korean forces are limited almost solely to their own defense. The military forces of Australia and New Zealand are small. Overall, US security partners in the Asia-Pacific are a net cost rather than a net benefit to the US military.

The highest priority regions for the Pentagon are those with wars or the imminent danger of wars involving US forces. This has made the US Central Command, which covers the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, a focal point for resources since 2001 because of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Unlike CENTCOM, PACOM gets no supplemental budget increases because the United States is conducting no ground wars in the Asia-Pacific. The famous US "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia announced by the Obama Administration actually began in earnest under Obama's predecessor George W. Bush, but was slowed when the "War on Terror" required the diversion of resources to the Middle East. PACOM does not own the US military forces within its area of responsibility until the Pentagon issues an order assigning specific units to PACOM control. After the massive and coordinated terrorist attacks against the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, the Pentagon required PACOM to release forces within the PACOM AOR to move to the Middle East, causing considerable friction between PACOM and the Pentagon. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (2001–2006) withdrew a US Army brigade from South Korea to serve in Iraq. This change became permanent, as the brigade never returned to Korea. Even US Europe Command draws more notice than PACOM in early 2017 because Russia is a more pressing strategic problem than China for the United States.

The boundaries delimiting PACOM's AOR have shifted over time, reflecting the instability of the Asia-Pacific region's importance in Washington's eyes. PACOM commanders have varied in their characterizations of the PACOM AOR as the "Asia-Pacific," the "Indo-Pacific," or the "Indo-Asia-Pacific." The fact that America has formal security obligations with East Asia but not South Asia suggests a basis for separating the two areas. Yet the Indian and Pacific Oceans are linked historically, culturally and commercially, as symbolized by the sealane through which oil from the Middle East travels by ship to the burgeoning economies of Northeast Asia. The issue remains unsettled. US Central Command (CENTCOM) covers the Arabian Sea, cutting out the northwest part of the Indian Ocean from PACOM's AOR. US Africa Command takes out the southwest Indian Ocean. This is despite the fact that the Indian Navy does naval exercises only with PACOM, and none with CENTCOM.

The particular personalities—including their strategic outlooks and management styles—of individual PACOM commanders and individual secretaries of defense can be crucially important to shaping the relationship

between the two organizations. Although they take orders from the Secretary of Defense at the Pentagon, different PACOM commanders may interpret those orders differently. William J. Fallon (2007–2007) took the positions that China was not a threat to US security and that Taiwan was more of a liability than an asset. He opposed selling US submarines to Taiwan and favored more US engagement with and reassurance of China. In contrast, his successor Robert F. Willard (2009—2012) focused on preparing for military contingencies against China. Samuel J. Locklear (2012—2015) emphasized getting along with China and identified climate change as the greatest long-term danger to the region. The pendulum swung back the other way again with Harry B. Harris (2015–present), who has been outspokenly critical of Chinese security policies, including the construction of military bases on artificial islands in the South China Sea.

The personal proclivities of the PACOM commander's boss, the Secretary of Defense, matter also. Secretaries vary in their assessments of particular global threats, and also in their administrative practices. For example, some secretaries have allowed the PACOM relatively wide latitude to speak with other branches of government such as the National Security Council, while others have been more restrictive. Current US PACOM Commander Admiral Harries reportedly has frequent and unrestricted contact with the president, members of Congress, and other US government officials, which seems to be the norm.

If US strategy toward Asia is contested among the top civilian leaders in Washington, the PACOM commander has more leeway to implement his own vision. The 2016 team of Defense Secretary Ash Carter and PACOM commander Admiral Harris appeared to be relatively close in their strategic and policy thinking, but such closeness is not always the case, even though officially it is the Secretary of Defense who appoints the PACOM commander.

PACOM-Pentagon Tensions

There are several natural points of tension between PACOM and the Pentagon. The day-to-day concerns of the two organizations are different. The Pentagon is deeply involved in US domestic political activities such as discussions with members of Congress, answering inquiries from the US media and various groups of private citizens, and managing the US defense budget. Pentagon decision-making is based on a global outlook and the occasional need to make difficult trade-offs. For example, recent US policy toward North Korea, which falls within PACOM's AOR, partly reflected US efforts to keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons. An assessment of how to respond to the DPRK made within a regional context might have differed from an assessment that prioritized events on the other side of the world. Pentagon staff believe PACOM sometimes does not fully understand the political ramifications of some proposed activities or military signals.

PACOM is more narrowly focused on maintaining military security in the Asia-Pacific region. PACOM's high-ranking leaders tend to believe there is excessive intervention or interference from the Pentagon in some aspects of their work. PACOM staff frequently complain that they know the Asia-Pacific region better than Pentagon staff, so the Office of the Secretary of Defense should be consistently receptive to PACOM's advice.

While understandable, this resentment on the part of PACOM overlooks the fact that the Pentagon is better equipped than PACOM to make US strategy and policy for the Asia-Pacific region. Overall, the quality of Pentagon staff is higher than the quality of PACOM staff. US military officers know that being identified as an Asia specialist is not the best path to promotion to high rank. Consequently, the best-qualified military analysts tend to work on the higher-level staffs in the Pentagon rather than at PACOM headquarters in Honolulu. PACOM staff are, however, well-suited to make recommendations to the Pentagon on such practical military matters as ways US forces can cooperate with regional counterparts and what assistance allies need to build their military capabilities.

Potential policy disagreements between PACOM and the Pentagon are mitigated by the significant voice PACOM has in the making of plans and policy in Washington. Pentagon civilian planners solicit the advice and input of the PACOM commander and his staff, and opportunities for interaction between Washington-based and Asia-Pacific-based analysts are frequent. PACOM also has a close informal relationship with the staff of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Also located in the Pentagon, the JCS are the heads of the four military services and the National Guard, whose formal duty is to advise the president and secretary of defense. Part of the PACOM commander's influence over policy-making stems from his knowledge of how foreign leaders think, based on his frequent meetings with them and their military commanders. Even US ambassadors often find the PACOM commander's insights about foreign countries enlightening.

PACOM is well integrated into the larger US intelligence bureaucracy. The regional combatant commanders, including the PACOM commander, approve the National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) produced by the US government. NIEs are authoritative assessments of specific national security issues based on the work of 16 US intelligence agencies including the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency. The combatant commanders are the users, and often the requestors, of NIEs.

If and when the PACOM commander disagrees with the policy dictated from Washington, he has ample opportunity within official channels to communicate his disagreement. The Office of the Secretary of Defense generally prefers that the PACOM commander not publicly comment on policy except to repeat and elaborate on the official positions communicated from Washington. In practice the PACOM commander might displease his superiors either by unintentionally making comments not reflective of a policy's original aims or by intentionally asserting, either directly or indirectly, that policy should be different from what Washington has prescribed. This occasionally occurs, leading to private admonishment of the PACOM commander by the Secretary of Defense.

The last years of the Obama Administration provided a visible example of policy disagreement between PACOM and Washington. Obama's White House preferred not to link American strategic disputes with China to other areas of business between the US and Chinese governments. Consequently, PACOM and the Department of Defense were mostly alone in standing up to China, with little backup from other parts of the US government. Obama himself refrained from serious and sustained criticism of China over the South China Sea until 2014, when a widespread disillusionment with Xi Jinping's government took hold within America's foreign affairs policy analysis community. Even then, Obama was unwilling to do much more than scold Beijing. Even from public media reports it was apparent that PACOM commander Harris favored a stronger US campaign of pushback against China's South China Sea policy than the White House was allowing him.⁷

Funding is another area of friction between PACOM and the Pentagon. The Pentagon decides on the allocation of resources among a collection of US military commands that compete vigorously for limited funds. Military commanders plan for worst-case scenarios. All wish they could preside over overwhelming advantages in military capability over their enemies and potential enemies in all possible conflict scenarios. Pressure on the US defense budget has increased markedly since the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. Certain weapons platforms such as unmanned aerial vehicles (more commonly known as "drones") are in high demand and fought over by all the regional commanders. Thus the Office of the Secretary of Defense sees itself as providing supervision over a highly competitive process in which some of the requests go beyond what is reasonable or practical.

It is PACOM's responsibility to advocate for the resources it needs, and the Pentagon's responsibility to critically evaluate PACOM's budget requests and to decide the actual allocation of funds. In practice, this often means arguing over the difference between a larger budget figure sought by PACOM and a smaller amount proposed by the Pentagon. For Pentagon budget analysts, the standard is what PACOM needs to accomplish its objective with a *reasonable* amount of risk. For the PACOM commander, the goal is to accomplish PACOM objectives with a *minimal* amount of risk. From the standpoint of Pentagon planners, PACOM and the other regional combatant commands sometimes present "wants" in the guise of "needs." PACOM commanders, on the other hand, worry about the Pentagon taking forces out of the Asia-Pacific region to fight in wars in other AORs. PACOM argues in these budget battles that the increase in Chinese military capabilities and activities makes PACOM's jobs of deterrence and readiness more challenging and entitles PACOM to more resources even if US forces are not presently in combat in the Asia-Pacific.

⁷ David B. Larter, "4-star admiral wants to confront China. The White House says not so fast." *Navy Times*, Sept. 26, 2016, <<https://www.navytimes.com/articles/4-star-admiral-wants-to-confront-china-the-white-house-says-not-so-fast>>.

PACOM commanders have an incentive to inflate their resource requests on the assumption that they cannot expect to get 100 percent of what they ask for.

A positive interpretation of these structural PACOM-Pentagon disagreements is to see them as creative tension. With differing points of view on some issues, each organization balances the other and rigorously scrutinizes its proposals. Arguably, the sometimes contentious process is constructive because it results in better outcomes for overall national security. Many planners and analysts on both the Pentagon and PACOM staffs see merit in the system as a whole even as they recognize the system ensures they will lose some specific battles.

PACOM, the Pentagon and Japan

Both the Pentagon and PACOM highly value the US-Japan alliance and consider Japan an indispensable American partner in the Asia-Pacific region. A determination to protect the Japanese islands from a military threat is part of the culture of PACOM. With the large number of US troops and their dependents stationed in Japanese territory, when PACOM commanders think about the defense of Japan they realize the security of their own comrades and family members is also at stake. It is no accident that Japan is the first place outside the United States where many new weapons systems, such as the F-35 fight aircraft, are deployed. US forces stationed in Japan would be crucially important in any contingency in Northeast Asia, including a conflict over Korea or Taiwan. The importance of the alliance to both Tokyo and Washington only increases in an era of assertive behavior by potential adversaries such as Russia, North Korea and especially China.

Many Japanese believe the United States Forces Japan (USFJ) headquarters is the most important US military organization for Japan. USFJ, however, is less important than either the Pentagon or PACOM in making decisions that might affect the Japanese people. Japanese officials are sometimes frustrated that USFJ cannot make timely decisions. This is largely because USFJ, led by a 3-star general officer, is a subordinate command to PACOM, led by a 4-star admiral. Furthermore, unlike US Forces Korea, USFJ is an administrative office, not a combat command center. In US military parlance USFJ is not “joint task force capable,” meaning it is not staffed to manage combat operations. It is akin to a holding company, managing the real estate occupied by US bases and carrying out public relations in Japan for the US military. USFJ is the middleman for most of PACOM’s interaction with Japan. USFJ does not even have operational control of the US forces in Japan. The Yokosuka-based US Seventh Fleet takes orders from PACOM, not USFJ. The reason Japan has an administrative headquarters and South Korea has a combat headquarters is the US military’s assessment that the danger of conflict is imminent on the Korean Peninsula, but not in Japan. In the event of a war involving Japan, the US government would likely immediately send a combat command staff to Japan to transform USFJ into a war-fighting headquarters.

The relationship between PACOM and the Pentagon represents a model for Japan to study and consider emulating in the relationship between the Japanese Ministry of Defense and the JMSDF. PACOM does not require specific permission from the Pentagon for most of its activities, which include routine peacetime tasks such as conducting exercises (often with other regional militaries), making foreign port calls and assessing the capability needs of allies. Under normal circumstances, PACOM operates mostly independently of the Pentagon within general guidelines, which both PACOM and Pentagon find advantageous. PACOM's independence is vastly greater than that of its Japanese counterpart, the JMSDF. Both PACOM and Pentagon would welcome Japan's government seeing the virtue of granting the JMSDF greater autonomy.

Japanese should understand that it is mainly PACOM rather than the Pentagon that works directly with a large and diverse group of Asia-Pacific governments, including Japan, separately on matters such as basing issues, troop rotations, joint exercises, capacity-building and status of forces agreements (the legal standing of foreign military personnel in a host country). Each of these governments has its own idiosyncrasies. Japan is a very different partner to work with than Tonga or Indonesia. PACOM deserves credit for the huge task of managing these various partnerships, each of which requires expertise in the military, political, legal, social and business cultures of the partner country.

Many officials in both the Pentagon and PACOM want to revise the US-ROK and US-Japan alliances to form a single trilateral alliance. The current arrangement of two separate US bilateral alliances with the ROK and Japan is an obsolete relic of the 1950s, set up shortly after the end of the Korean War (1950-1953). Management of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula would be inefficient under the structure in place in 2017. Although Korea is within the PACOM AOR, US forces in Korea are under the command of US Forces Korea (USFK), which organizationally is equal to PACOM, not subordinate. The USFK commander is a four-star general officer, the same rank held by the PACOM commander. The respective responsibilities of PACOM, USFK and the US 7th Fleet in a Korea conflict contingency are not clear. The various commanders would sort this out after the conflict began. An order from Washington would give the USFK commander authority to use forces within a designated geographic area, and specify which additional forces from elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific PACOM would contribute to the Korea campaign.

Seven military bases in Japan are designated United Nations bases because they would be critically important to any US military activity in a conflict in Korea. Many Japanese oppose US bases being used for any contingency other than the defense of Japan. The Japanese military high command long thought of Korea and Japan as two distinct theaters of potential warfare. Now some Japanese military planners are promoting the idea of conceptualizing Korea and Japan as a single theater, aligning with the many high-ranking US military officers and civilian officials in both Washington and Honolulu who advocate major structural changes that will increase and

improve cooperation between US, Japanese and South Korean forces. Trilateral activity is already occurring and is increasing, including consultations, exercises and planning. An immediate problem, however, is the lack of an institutionalized structure and process for tripartite decision-making. Defense of the ROK in the event of a conflict would require the Japanese government to quickly make the decisions that would facilitate the contribution of Japanese resources to assist the South Koreans. Undue delay would increase the danger to the ROK, and indirectly, to Japan. The Americans recognize, however, that political obstacles exist in both Japan and South Korea. One potentially fruitful approach is to focus on trilateral military cooperation that is practical and tactical, out of the public view so as to avoid attracting nationalistic criticism. Another desirable characteristic is to make such cooperation clearly and plausibly targeted at North Korea rather than China so as to undercut the legitimacy of the inevitable Chinese complaints.

If conflict breaks out on the Korean Peninsula, the US military would decide how to prosecute the war and would expect Japan to cooperate. The PACOM commander would play a prominent, and perhaps the primary, role in this process. The Pentagon would issue the operational orders, but PACOM advice would shape these orders. How PACOM decides to handle scenarios involving North Korea could affect Japan. This raises the potential problem of Japanese being expected to support a strategy that Tokyo disagreed with. Japanese are understandably Japan-centric in their thinking, while the Americans think more broadly because of America's regional and global responsibilities. For example, imagine two possible war plans. Option A might promise greater and quicker assistance to South Korea forces, but at the cost of a higher expected risk that the DPRK might fire a missile at Japanese territory. Option B might be the opposite, safer for Japan but less protective of South Korea. Tokyo would likely favor Option B, while the Americans might decide to implement Option A over Japanese objection. Close consultation before such a conflict occurs could help ameliorate this kind of problem, but it cannot be completely eliminated because US and Japanese interests will never be perfectly aligned.

The ultimate authority over US military strategy in the Asia-Pacific region stems from the Pentagon, based on instructions from the US president. PACOM will follow direct and unambiguous orders from the Office of the Secretary of Defense even if the PACOM commander disagrees with the orders. While the Pentagon prescribes policy and strategy, PACOM has more direct contact with Japan and spends more energy planning for the defense of Japan than does the Pentagon. PACOM is the organization through which working-level Japanese defense officials discuss security threats and operational matters with their US professional counterparts. Japanese should be highly attentive to how PACOM is addressing regional security issues, and should be desirous to be involved in the planning process. To achieve maximum understanding of US plans and intentions under various regional contingencies, close monitoring of the thinking of Pentagon and White House planners as well as PACOM planners is necessary.