

PRESERVING AND PROJECTING MARITIME POWER VIA THE ARCTIC-PACIFIC

Wesley Moerbe

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Much wargaming, research, and scholarship has gone into visualizing and describing the contours of major combat operations in a Western Pacific conflict with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). But power projection has dozens of other points of vulnerability. The very weapons, fuel, and repair parts needed to assure victory must arrive at the end of a long vulnerable line of communications that stretches from the US homeland to the weapons engagement zone near Taiwan and Japan, a challenge that concerns quite a few strategists.ⁱ In previous conflicts, the US has enjoyed the luxury of time to reignite the forges that supply victory. Adversary planning assures us that the US cannot expect a similar opportunity.ⁱⁱ Viewed as a part of a fluid and interconnected global theater of operations, Alaska's position in the Arctic-Pacific holds the potential to answer the challenge of contested logistics.¹

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

Admiral Paparo, the USINDOPACOM commander recently said, “when we run war games [for the Pacific Theater], the red team goes for the combat logistics force, every single time.”ⁱⁱⁱ Every service component has updated their operating concept to answer the challenge of the PLA's growing capabilities in the Western Pacific. The US Navy's approach, Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) calls for distribution of assets and concentration of effects. The USMC developed Expeditionary Advance Basing Operations (EABO) which expects to compliment DMO by controlling narrow littorals within the enemy's weapon engagement zone, and thus limit their freedom of action, while enabling the fleet. Dispersion, redundancy, and survivability undergird both operating concepts.² However, both of operating concepts increase, rather than reduce the logistical burden and will call for creative options and prescient investment strategies to implement.^{iv}

KEY ASSUMPTIONS

- Conflict between powerful actors in the Western Pacific will be prolonged. This will require sustained logistical support from the U.S. mainland to provide sufficient munitions, replacement parts, and fuel to forward-deployed forces.
- Given a few aging fleet support ships and a stagnant shipbuilding industry, expect severe near- and mid-term constraints in underway replenishment and combat logistics capacity.
- China will leverage its significant naval and land-based rocket forces to disrupt U.S. power projection in the western Pacific and will also utilize a variety of measures to target and interdict sealift transiting from the west coast as they move across the northern Pacific to intermediate logistics hubs.^v
- In view of its “Friendship without Limits” policy, Russia, even if publicly neutral, can be expected to act in alignment with China, sharing intelligence and potentially gray zone activity, increasing risks to U.S. operations in the Arctic and North Pacific.^{vi}

¹ See Figure 1.

² While maritime operations are the focus of this paper, the USAF's Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concept, calls for similar dispersion methods and suggests a joint problem that benefits from joint solutions.



THE PROBLEM DEFINED

The maritime logistics of a Western Pacific conflict must traverse an expansive sea line of communications contested by enemy missiles, unmanned systems, and submarines. With the US Navy and sealift fleet as small as they ever been, the loss of even a few surface vessels carrying critical munitions and repair parts could have campaign changing effects.^{vii} To project power across the world's largest ocean in a contested environment will strain every sinew.

Given the expense and scarcity of high-end equipment, naval logistics are not optimized to absorb losses, damage, and high wear to equipment and sustain a prolonged campaign.^{viii} Moreover, with more than 4,000 transits across the north Pacific, containerized missile systems can turn nearly any unassuming merchant vessel into a missile boat.^{ix} Drone systems could also be launched from containerized systems in a similar manner, as they casually transit the high seas.^x With over 9,000 CCP-controlled merchant ships and approximately 2,500 distant-water fishing vessels, their militarization significantly expands the potential threat, surpassing the 370 warships of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA-N).^{xi} Adversaries already target undersea infrastructure, which includes such dual-use investments as undersea surveillance and communications, to great effect.^{xii} Previously safe waterways are vulnerable to creative adversaries able to leverage maturing technology.

OPTIONS

To support the interests of INDOPACOM, NORTHCOM, and TRANSCOM, the joint force will benefit from taking steps to preserve and project military power in the Arctic-Pacific via Alaska.

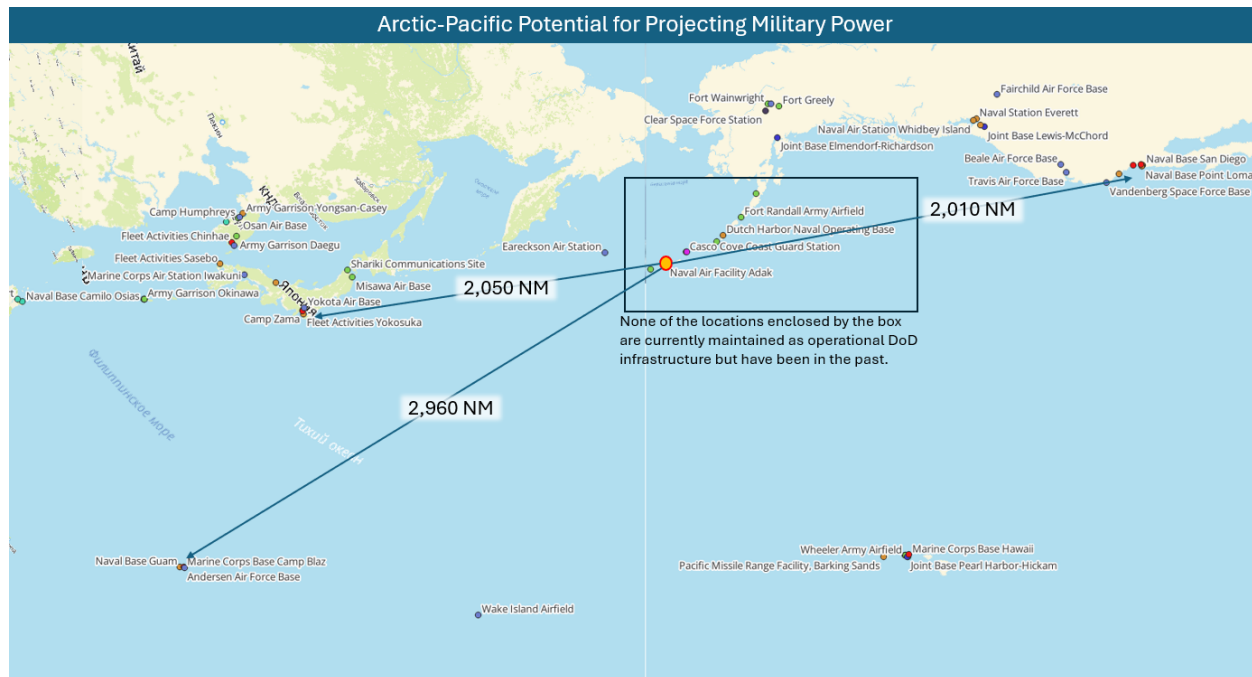
1. Pursuant to the aims of DMO and EABO, **cultivate sustainment and logistical redundancy capabilities along the Aleutian chain.** This will position high demand parts and supplies closer to the user, with a degree of protection and mitigate some fears that naval aviation replacement parts and munitions, stocked on the basis of non-war time predictive analysis, will be insufficient to sustain operations and could limit sorties. The high rate of munitions expenditure needed to defeat UAS and missile threats elevates the value of additional munitions stocks in the Aleutian chain.
 - a. Lower cost options could take the form of **reestablishing hardened supply depots and fuel storage to the extent required to carry out over-the-shore resupply.** This would add options for the limited number of replenishment vessels and prevent a lengthy return voyage to depots in Seattle or San Diego.
 - b. A higher commitment of resources might include **reactivating port facilities in Adak, Cold Harbor, and Dutch Harbor to provide support to damaged vessels and prevent further loss of life and material.**
2. The increased relevance of the North Pacific Great Circle Route makes posturing stocks key to power projection in the Arctic-Pacific region but adds urgency to the need for greater domain awareness and local security capability.
 - a. **Energizing and expanding Cold War era undersea surveillance systems could be a means to enhance domain awareness and defense measures in the region.** These systems, now shared with NOAA and other research institutions, will benefit from advances in fiber optics and AI.^{xiii} With PLA-N building ships at remarkable rates, deterrence through tracking and anti-submarine capability does not depend on already backlogged shipbuilding efforts.^{xiv}
 - b. Maintaining serviceable P8 Poseidon and K-46 refueler capable runways (greater than 8000') with airfield support, helps **eliminate an "air gap" and free US Navy carrier groups from coverage in the North Pacific.**



- c. Current partnerships, including with the Canadian military, could augment surveillance and deterrence options. If repositioned in support of combat operations in the western pacific, the **gap left by Alaska's fifth generation fighter squadrons could be filled by Canadian CF-18's**, assuming normalized and friendly relations.
- d. Merchant and replenishment convoys will require surface combatant escorts, likely destroyers, capable of providing air defense coverage. The US Coast Guard could share a portion of this burden but **requires cutters better armed to defend against unmanned systems - a need that deserves immediate attention.**^{xv}

CONCLUSION

The United States is not positioned to out-build China and cannot afford losses on the scale of the Battle of the Atlantic.^{xvi} Winning a future “Battle of the Pacific” will require ingenuity and shrewd investment well before first contact. The geography of the Aleutian chain offers precisely such an opportunity. Its potential to provide logistical depth, power projection, and area denial aligns with the service component operating concepts and the interests of USINDOPACOM, USNORTHCOM, and USTRANSCOM. These investments would directly support U.S. sailors, soldiers, and airmen who currently stand watch at the end of a vulnerable logistical chain—and time is running out to strengthen and secure it.



Author's Disclaimer: The views expressed in this Brief are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of Defense or of the U.S. Government.



ENDNOTES

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