The New Line in the Pacific

The American emphasis will be on air and sea power, with fewer boots on the ground.

By Richard Halloran

In a talk he gave in September, the commander of US forces in the Pacific offered a pointed rationale for changes which have begun sweeping through his command and will continue to do so for the next 10 years.

“We must maintain the effective overmatch, the powerful overmatch, we currently enjoy,” said Adm. Timothy J. Keating, the commander of US Pacific Command, “whether it’s based on numbers, capabilities, or ... a combination of both.” Keating added that PACOM’s forces “must retain the ability to dominate in any scenario, in all environments, without exception.”

He told his audience that Washington must be committed to peaceful solutions to problems, but “must always be prepared to act decisively and, if necessary, alone.”

The changes now in train will add up to the most extensive realignment of US military power in Asia since the end of the Vietnam War more than three decades ago.

Washington now is drawing a line in the water, so to speak, from the Sea of Japan southward through the Taiwan Strait and into the South China Sea. The US is withdrawing some forces from South Korea—west of that line—and concentrating on islands to the east of it—in Japan, Guam, and Southeast Asia.

The emphasis will be on air and sea power, rather than ground forces. As Keating said in an interview: “We will have fewer boots on the ground” by 2017.

Some changes will take place over the next five years but, given long planning times, more significant shifts likely will take place in the final five years. USAF Lt. Gen. Daniel P. Leaf, deputy PACOM commander, said, “Over the next decade, this will be an urgent, unprecedented military program.”

In this region, it is a long way from almost anywhere to almost anywhere else. To help ease that problem, the US is moving to turn Guam into a forward air and naval hub.

Leaf, who oversees the Guam buildup, said: “It would be easy to get daunted by the challenges we face.” The US is confronted with several potential adversaries in Asia.

China looms largest in US calculations. The uppermost question is whether the communist giant will use its armed power to attempt a conquest of Taiwan, the island over which Beijing claims sovereignty. Such a move would risk war with the US and the loss to China of a US market that will top $300 billion in 2007.
North Korea will remain worrisome. Whiffs of intelligence suggest that a succession struggle may be under way. The hermit state’s economy, long near dead, is crumbling further. Military forces lack training. Food is in such short supply that rations to the troops have been cut. Still, North Korea’s leaders are dangerous because they are ignorant of the outside world and prone to miscalculation.

Russia, US officers say, is on the rebound. The Russian Navy’s Pacific fleet, once rusting at anchor, has begun to pull itself back together and show some life, helped along by an expanding national economy.

Southeast Asia poses a triple threat of terror, piracy, and criminal smuggling. Most US officials seem resigned to the spread of terror networks and possible attacks through Southeast and South Asia.

Key Elements

Plans for the Pacific realignment call for development of six critical elements that, taken together, might be called PACOM 2017. They are airpower, missile defense, sea power, reformed land forces, special operations forces, and engagement.

In airpower, US commanders will emphasize command and control for integrated aerial campaigns. Some airpower forces are to be stationed on land bases in the “Pacific triad” of Hawaii, Guam, and Alaska. To a lesser extent, air forces will be based in Japan and South Korea, with occasional sorties out of Singapore, Australia, and the British-owned atoll of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean.

Other airpower elements will be sea-based. Today, the US Navy keeps five big-deck aircraft carriers in the US Pacific Command region (between the US West
Coast and the east coast of Africa). Plans call for adding a sixth big deck, USS Carl Vinson, to the US Pacific Fleet in 2010.

Moreover, the Navy will decommission the aged, conventionally powered carrier Kitty Hawk, currently forward deployed in Japan, and replace her with the nuclear-powered USS George Washington, adding a new net increment of capability.

Airpower plays a key role in overcoming vast Pacific distances because of its ability to swiftly concentrate forces and coordinate quick responses to crises. For that to happen, however, the Air Force needs to build, deploy, and protect networks linking together the disparate forces.

Lt. Gen. Loyd S. Utterback, who commands 13th Air Force at Hickam AFB, Hawaii, said the main Pacific Air Forces effort of the next five to 10 years will be to increase USAF’s ability for command and control of airpower. “We will be able to pull it all together in near real time,” said Utterback.

The heart of air operations is the Kenney Headquarters, particularly the Maj. Richard Bong Air Operations Center set up in June 2005 at a cost of $32.6 million. Standing in the center’s dim interior, lit by the glow of several hundred computer screens, Col. Timothy L. Saffold, the center’s commander, said that Pacific Air Forces can run integrated air campaigns throughout PACOM’s area of responsibility from this air operations center. Saffold said the center could, in a contingency, report directly to the PACOM commander.

Big Changes in Guam

“We develop the strategy, do the planning, issue the operational orders, watch the execution, and assess the outcome of operations,” he said.

For the Air Force, the biggest physical changes are coming in Guam, where Andersen Air Force Base is being refurbished. B-52, B-1, and B-2 bombers will be in Guam on “permanent rotation,” meaning they will be there on four-month deployments from the continental US.

Fighters, including the F-22 Raptor, will deploy to Guam frequently and three Raptor squadrons will be assigned to the Pacific—two in Alaska, one in Hawaii. Three Global Hawk unmanned surveillance aircraft will be posted on Guam in 2009; a fourth may be added later.

When it comes to assuring future air operations, Utterback said, the main concern will be to obtain tankers in sufficient numbers and quality. Air Force aerial refuelers are wearing out, he said, and replacing them is a top priority.

“We are tanker dependent,” he declared. “We need them to get there and stay there.”

Plans call for George Washington to leave its homeport of Norfolk, Va., and relieve Kitty Hawk, at Yokosuka, down the bay from Tokyo. Another tacair boost will come in 2010, when Carl Vinson, with her 85 aircraft, comes out of a deep overhaul and joins the Pacific Fleet. The F-35C Joint Strike Fighter is scheduled in 2013 to begin replacing earlier versions of the F/A-18.

Except for George Washington, America’s mammoth Pacific Ocean carriers will remain based on the US West Coast, but they will have access to berths in the western Pacific that will permit them to operate for many months away from homeport. One of these is planned for Guam. The base at Changi in Singapore has serviced carriers for almost 10 years; and Yokosuka is available for carriers other than George Washington.

A second key component in the strategy is missile defense. China, North Korea, and other nations in the region are deploying ballistic and cruise missiles. For a year, USAF Lt. Gen. Bruce A. Wright, commander of US Forces Japan, has spoken out about what he calls the urgent need for the US and its allies to build missile defenses to counter potential threats.

“Missiles,” said Wright, “are everywhere these days.”

Within the last two years, USAF set up a missile defense command center, the Army created a missile defense command, and the Navy integrated...
Aegis cruisers and destroyers into the defensive system.

The Air Force operations center at Hickam is responsible for coordinating missile defense in the region. It is tasked with bringing together the capabilities of all services and with integrating them into a missile defense.

The 94th Army Air and Missile Defense Command, at nearby Ft. Shafter, Hawaii, has just reached full operational capability. It has radar in northern Japan to track missiles headed toward the US or US forces in Asia and has posted a battalion of advanced PAC-3 air defense missiles to Okinawa in southern Japan.

In Asian nations, said a study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, policies toward missile defense range “from official antipathy to enthusiastic embrace.”

Japanese actions are being driven by a growing missile threat from North Korea. For Taiwan, missile defense offers the key to the island’s defense against China’s growing missile systems. Japan has urged the US to speed deployment of missile defenses. Taiwan is close to desperate for assistance in this regard, because that island faces about 1,000 Chinese ballistic missiles deployed just across the Taiwan Strait.

In contrast, the study found, South Korea’s government “sees overt participation in missile defenses as antithetical to its national interests,” notably its hope of reconciliation with North Korea and good relations with China.

The United States is expanding its sea power in the Pacific. Plans call for the Navy, within the next few years, to station 60 percent of its nuclear-powered attack submarines to the Pacific, the better to counter China’s growing submarine threat and to meet other contingencies, such as the naval operations of a resurgent Russia.

Moving Parts

The Pacific Fleet in future years will deploy 34 attack submarines, up from 26 in 2007. These submarines, though based on the West Coast and in Hawaii, will have access to facilities in Japan, Guam, Singapore, Australia, and Diego Garcia. Three have already been forward deployed to Guam.

To the attack submarine fleet in the Pacific will be added two guided missile submarines, USS Ohio and USS Michigan. Both are former “boomers”—ballistic-missile-firing boats—that have been converted to carry conventional cruise missiles and sophisticated intelligence equipment.

These warships each can fire 154 cruise missiles, either singly or in salvo. They also can carry up to 66 special operations troops for many weeks to insert them into a hostile shore and retrieve them later. Each submarine will have two crews, Blue and Gold, which will permit them to mount 400-day patrols. The submarines, based in Bangor, Wash., will pull into Guam to change crews and undergo maintenance and resupply.

Land forces are undergoing a significant realignment. The Army expects to withdraw most of its troops from South Korea and to reduce, dismantle, or move the United Nations Command, 8th Army headquarters, Combined Forces Command, and headquarters of the 2nd Infantry Division.

The changes in US ground deployments will generate much attention, because the shifts being considered are politically sensitive. South Korea will see the largest change, for three reasons:

- South Korea can defend itself against North Korea.
- The US must have the flexibility to send troops where they are most needed.
- Many South Koreans have become anti-American.

By year end, the number of US troops posted in South Korea will drop to 25,000, down from the 37,000 that were deployed there not long ago. By 2017, the US could have little more than a small residual force on the peninsula.

As part of this realignment, ground forces remaining in Korea will be moved well south of Seoul to a new base that is to be built near Osan Air Base. Air Force officers say that the service will
continue to maintain a force of fighters at that air base.

Combined Forces Command—the command element that is led by an American with a South Korean deputy and in which Americans and Koreans serve side by side—will disappear in 2012 when South Korea assumes control of its forces in both peace and war.

The proposals would also have the four-star general who commands US forces in Korea, currently Army Gen. Burwell B. Bell, moved to Ft. Shafter to command US Army Pacific. That would put the Army’s Pacific commander on a par with Air Force and Navy four-star commanding officers.

The Army also plans to assign two or three new Stryker brigades to Alaska and Hawaii. Almost half of the Marine Corps’ forces in Japan will move to Guam, but Marine Forces Pacific will still command two-thirds of the combat troops of the USMC.

Marine Forces Pacific will keep about the same number of troops in Okinawa, Hawaii, and California but 8,000 of the 18,000 marines in Okinawa will move to Guam in 2014 to 2015. Tokyo, which wants to reduce friction between US troops and local citizens in Okinawa, has agreed to pay between $20 billion and $30 billion for the move and associated costs. Another 9,000 Marine Corps dependents and civilian employees will also move.

A critical but so far unanswered question: Will the Air Force and Navy be able to provide airlift and sealift sufficient to move the ground forces as needed? New C-17 transports are being stationed in Hawaii and Alaska. The Navy today keeps about a dozen amphibious transport ships in the region, and plans to build more to meet the need.

Special Operators Needed
Still, some officials question whether the planned lift will be adequate, given the huge requirement.

The fifth Pacific growth area is in special operations forces. Air Force combat controllers and SOF pilots, Army Green Berets and Rangers, Navy SEALs, and similar units have been active in small, largely secret operations in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia and in fighting Islamic terrorists around the Sulu Sea.

Special operations forces have been targeting the remote islands running from the Philippines, where Muslim terrorists train, to Malaysia and Indonesia. Terrorists hop from one island to another, then fade into the population. PACOM officers contend that SOF troops are gradually breaking up the terrorist cells there.

Radical Muslim movements in Southeast Asia are homegrown but have become affiliated with the al Qaeda terrorists led by Osama bin Laden. In operations against them, said a senior officer, “we work through, by, and with local forces and citizens.”

SOF leaders expect someday to be training anti-insurgent forces in Thailand, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, all nations struggling with expanding terrorist threats. SOF units are also prepared to contribute to counterdrug and counter-smuggling operations.

The special operators will be affected by the reduction of US ground forces in Asia. “The more the conventional force goes home,” said a SOF officer in Hawaii, “the more a SOF unit will be out front.” In South Korea, a handful of SOF troops are expected to stay behind after the regulars have left.

Finally, there is engagement, which sends a strategic message to allies and partners that US military forces will help defend them if needed. Engagement includes visits by the Pacific commander, military exchanges, combined training, port calls by warships, seminars to which officers from all over the Pacific are invited, disaster relief, and humanitarian operations.

PACOM is constructing a $20 million warfighting center at Pearl Harbor that will use simulations and wargames to train American officers and those of allies. The facility, scheduled to be completed in 2009, is “expected to bring thousands of visitors to Oahu from
around the world to attend planning conferences and military exercises,” said a PACOM statement.

Engagement has spread to the intelligence world, where operatives are reticent about sharing anything. The United States and Malaysia in early September arranged a gathering in Kuala Lumpur of 19 national intelligence chiefs. China and Russia were invited but declined to attend.

The Malaysian chief of armed forces, Gen. Abdul Aziz Zainal, told the gathering that, given the prevalence of alienated individuals, militant organizations, and other nearly invisible enemies, “it becomes crucial for us to cooperate and share intelligence to counter them.”

Warships also undertake humanitarian missions critical to engagement. This summer, the amphibious assault ship USS Peleliu, which usually transports 1,900 combat marines, sailed on a four-month medical mission to the Philippines, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Marshall Islands.

No Dividing the Pacific

Engagement is also intended to deter potential adversaries. A former Pacific commander, Adm. Dennis C. Blair, once told Congress that military exchanges were intended to send China a message that, while Washington did not seek war, “don’t mess with us.”

On another occasion, a Chinese admiral was threatening military action against Taiwan that might involve the US. Blair listened for a minute, then said: “Look, you should understand that I own the water out there and I own the sky over that water. Don’t you think we should talk about something more constructive?”

During a May visit to China, Keating encountered a Chinese admiral who suggested that the US and China divide control of the Pacific Ocean between them, with China maintaining order in the western half while the US confined itself to the eastern half. A PACOM officer said Keating told his Chinese interlocutor: “We’re not going to give it up, and we want you to know that.”

The US military presence in the theater has been shrinking for nearly 40 years. Retrenchment was presaged by President Nixon in Guam in 1969. Nixon said nations in Asia should look to their own defenses. At that time, the US had in Asia 746,000 uniformed troops, of which 510,000 were in Vietnam. By the late 1970s, the number was down to about 105,000.

A turning point came in the early 1990s. The volcanic eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines in 1991 made Clark Air Base unusable. Soon after, Manila withdrew permission for the US to use Subic Bay naval base. Adm. Charles R. Larson, the Pacific commander then, proclaimed a policy of “places, not bases” and negotiated access to a naval base in Singapore.

In 1998, Singapore constructed a berth that can accommodate an aircraft carrier. The Navy found that the repairs performed there were better than those at Subic Bay. As added bonuses, the US did not pay rent and stationed only 150 people at the Singapore facility.

President George W. Bush’s first Secretary of Defense, Donald H. Rumsfeld, began a process that would lead to greater US reliance on air and sea power in the region, simplified chains of command, and a reduction of forces.

By the end of 2006, US military personnel in Asia were down to 77,000. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has essentially continued the planned changes. The current overhaul of the US presence in the Pacific has been a long time coming, and the new direction is clearly needed.