

Pacific Pathways: Overcoming the Tyranny of Distance

■ By Brig. Gen. Kurt J. Ryan

The CW3 Harold A. Clinger, an Army logistics support vessel, departs Hawaii on June 6, 2015, and begins a trans-Pacific voyage in support of Pacific Pathways 15.2. The vessel supported Exercise Talisman Sabre 15 in Australia, Garuda Shield 15 in Indonesia, and Keris Strike 15 in Malaysia. (Photo courtesy of the 545th Transportation Company, 45th Sustainment Brigade, 8th Theater Sustainment Command)



In 1781, Gen. George Washington, commander of the Continental Army, used French ships to sail seasoned colonial soldiers and supplies to the Virginia Peninsula. Those soldiers surprised and then defeated the British commander Lord Charles Cornwallis at the Battle of Yorktown. Some claim this victory turned the world upside down; sea power combined with the transport of land forces would become key to the young nation's ability to project power worldwide for the next 200 years.

Today, following nearly a decade and a half of having rotational combat forces fighting in the Middle East, a highly experienced and capable Army is mostly back home in the United States and training to meet new missions around the world. As outlined in the nation's recent defense strategy, the military has begun to "pivot" or "rebalance" to focus on the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.

Pacific Pathways

The Army is testing new ways of engaging throughout the Pacific region, which is characterized by vast oceans, a complex grouping of islands,

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The Pacific Pathways program strengthens security cooperation and provides an array of options for the U.S. government to respond to crises in the Pacific region.

major continents, and large littoral populations encompassing several dozen nations. To get there and operate there, the Army is experimenting with an innovative employment concept known as “Pacific Pathways,” or just “Pathways” for short.

The program leverages contract and military sealift married with Army capability packages to operate across the Pacific for two purposes: to strengthen security cooperation and conduct crisis response. Since the Spanish-American War, the Army has had a vested interest in sustaining peace and stability in the Pacific. A necessary element in support of that goal is the continued ability to sustain extensive, long-term sea-basing operations throughout the region.

A unit deploying under this program is called a Pathway. The first Pathway left the U.S. West Coast in June 2014 with elements of the 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington.

It traveled to Indonesia and Malaysia, where U.S. Soldiers participated in back-to-back exercises with Indonesian and Malaysian troops over the course of several weeks. Following these training events, the Pathway sailed to Japan to participate in a bilateral exercise with Japan Self-Defense Forces.

In November, the unit returned to Washington after navigating a five-month, 17,000-mile Pacific journey. During this trip, the unit not only participated in a number of training events but also remained available in the theater to respond to regional crises, if needed.

The Army conducted three Pacific Pathways deployments in 2015 and participated in multinational exercises in Thailand, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, and Japan. Each deployment consisted of elements of a brigade combat team from the 25th Infantry Division. Two Pathways are scheduled for 2016, and more are planned for 2017.

Although it seems like common

sense to string together a group of geographically close but otherwise disparate exercises, Pathways represents a new way of doing business. It saves the Army money by reducing back-and-forth transportation costs for individual engagement exercises.

The Pathways initiative also allows the United States to have a rotational presence in parts of the Pacific where permanent basing may not be possible, thereby providing a quick response capability for humanitarian emergencies or regional crises.

By carefully sequencing training events and using the same ship for different missions (for example, a scheduled rotation of Army forces to Korea and the transfer of military hardware to foreign nations), the Army will save the U.S. government millions of dollars. The three Pathways in 2015 were combined training events that, if implemented in isolation, would have cost taxpayers twice as much to conduct.

Room for Improvement

The Pathways program certainly has areas that can be improved. For example, choosing the right ship is critical to agility and flexibility. Current laws and policy limit access to the most capable and cost-effective vessels—those that are owned by the government and managed by the Military Sealift Command.

When U.S. government vessels are not available, the government prefers contracting U.S. flag commercial ships. When these ships are unavailable, the military must rely on contracting other commercial vessels.

The first problem is that the U.S. Army in the Pacific currently lacks dedicated strategic and operational intratheater assigned sealift. Having dedicated strategic sealift vessels instead of relying on commercial vessels would make the Pathways initiative more effective.

It would allow access to shallower ports, enable multiple loading and unloading options, provide secure communications, offer bunks for more troops, allow for bulk fuel,

ammunition, and water storage, and provide maintenance and medical treatment facilities. It would also strengthen the capabilities of the U.S. Pacific Command.

Second, to increase effective operational capability for units on a Pathways deployment, a tailored array of crisis-response equipment and supplies should be part of the unit's ship manifest. For example, during typhoon season, a Pathways ship could contain humanitarian crisis response equipment and supplies, such as emergency shelter supplies, food, bottled water, and medical kits, in addition to the equipment necessary for the unit's planned military exercises.

To strengthen the ability of any Pathways unit to engage in crisis response, the Army should strengthen expeditionary mission command packages—preferably at the division level—and routinely exercise them during a comprehensive emergency deployment readiness exercise. These command and control elements could be structured and trained to fly on short notice for rapid deployment on a small number of cargo airplanes.

Linking this rapidly deployable command and control capability with a Pathways unit could dramatically improve the nation's ability to respond to typhoons, tsunamis, and other crises in the vast Indo-Asia-Pacific region.

Criticism of the Program

Despite Pathways' benefits, skeptics have raised questions about the initiative. Some claim it infringes on already well-defined missions executed by the Navy and Marine Corps. Others say that the Pathways program may be a poor allocation of Army resources during a time of shrinking defense budgets.

Still others argue that there are more pressing demands for Army forces around the world in light of emerging threats in Europe and the Middle East. The harshest critics see the program as part of a broader effort by the Army to protect its share of the Pentagon budget.



The crew of the CW3 Harold A. Clinger begins a trans-Pacific voyage in support of Pacific Pathways 15.2 on June 6, 2015. (Photo courtesy of the 545th Transportation Company, 45th Sustainment Brigade, 8th Theater Sustainment Command)

Rather than competing for resources, the Pathways initiative in fact complements other services' engagements in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. The region is obviously vast, and many crises—whether man-made or natural—occur with little warning.

By placing units on a Pathway for several months, the Army contributes to effectively meeting regional objectives for military-to-military engagement while also providing senior U.S. leaders with flexibility and options for responding to crises across the huge distances in the Pacific.

Learning from and improving on the Pacific Pathways deployments will ensure that future iterations will provide greater value for the military and, more broadly, the entire United States. U.S. Army forces continue

to build security and stability with allies and partners throughout the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.

The Pathways initiative represents an opportunity for the U.S. military to achieve that objective more efficiently and more effectively than it has in the past while also providing a greater array of options for the U.S. government to respond to crises across a massive region.

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