

Always Ready, Always There: Marines and the Pacific Rebalance by Lt. Gen. Terry Robling

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As I travel and meet with civilian and military leaders throughout the Pacific, there is a recurring question that I am inevitably asked: “is the US commitment to the Pacific, or the so-called ‘rebalance,’ real?” The underlying skepticism of the question is understandable given the media clamor about fiscal uncertainty and enduring security concerns in the Middle East, but my response is unequivocal: “yes.”

As I explain why my answer is “yes”, I always note that the concept of the preeminent importance of the Asia-Pacific region has long been part of our national strategy. This initiative by the US government to refocus toward the Pacific is primarily diplomatic and economic, with the military playing a complementary role. There is no question that the Asia-Pacific is the world’s economic powerhouse and critical to global economic prosperity. The era since 1945, once referred to as the “Asian economic miracle” by my predecessor Lt. Gen. Keith Stalder, saw unprecedented economic growth in this region due to a remarkable period of relative peace, with a few tragic exceptions which were mostly geographically isolated. The US military and diplomatic missions, in partnership with our allies and friends, were the underwriters of the security that has enabled tremendous social and economic prosperity. To suggest that we ever turned our backs to this part of the globe is disingenuous.

America has always been and will remain heavily invested in and committed to the Asia Pacific. The United States traded \$2.38 trillion in goods and services with Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) countries in 2011, amounting to 56 percent of total U.S. trade. This trade of goods and services has increased 135 percent from nearly \$1 trillion in 1994 and continues to increase. Beyond our shared economic ties, five of the United States’ seven major defense treaties are with Asia-Pacific nations and we have many more strong and enduring partnerships in the region.

For the Marine Corps, two-thirds of our operational forces are assigned to the Pacific. This allocation of resources is intuitive given the vast maritime and littoral nature of the theater. Our weighted presence is also appropriate in that our primary functions are to assure littoral access to the joint force commander and respond to crises. Crisis take many forms, and impact every area of the Asia-Pacific region. Cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanoes are just as likely and dangerous threat to stability and prosperity as are despots who threaten use of and proliferate nuclear weapons. Territorial disagreements over natural resources such as oil, gas, and fishing areas cause friction that strain relationships, and could result in conflict if miscalculation occurs. Having a versatile, ready to respond force like the Marine Corps in the region

helps ensure the peace, stability, and prosperity that benefit everyone.

The Marine Corps is a force perfectly designed and suited for both crisis response and the Asia-Pacific maritime environment. In partnership with the US Navy, US Marines are America’s crisis response force, ready to help an ally in trouble or protect vital interests. US Marines are organized, trained and equipped to operate from ships, from the air, and ashore as an air and ground combined arms force. This integrated force, known as the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF), consists of air, ground and logistics elements under a single command element and enables the MAGTF to conduct self-sustained operations or combine with other forces. The MAGTF is the key to Marine operations and provides a balanced, combined-arms force which is expandable, adaptable, and tailor-able to the mission.

The proven combination of the US Marines working hand-in-hand with the US Navy from amphibious ships provides a flexible expeditionary capability that can be tailored to rapidly respond across the spectrum of crises in the region, from major combat and maritime security to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR). This unique capability is a key element to the US forward presence in the region and ability to provide peace and security in the Asia-Pacific. In the past five years, we conducted 12 humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations (more than any other US Service) in Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Japan, saving tens of thousands of lives. US Marines were among the first to respond to assist our partners during the Tohoku earthquake in Northeastern Japan and the Boxing Day Tsunami in Southeast Asia.

In responding to crises in Asia-Pacific, the Marines are large enough to serve when needed as the Joint Force Land Component Command (JFLCC), or form the core of a Joint Task Force (JTF), either for unilateral action or, as is usually the case, part of a Combined or Coalition Task Force. We are also exceptionally agile and can scale our force to operate and train as small units when appropriate.

US Marines are able to rapidly assume these roles because we are forward deployed in the region on a daily basis and work routinely with partner nations’ militaries, forging an effective combined force that ensures the interests of all. Our relationship with each partner military is unique, and we focus on areas of *common interest*. Many of our partner nations view the Marine Corps’ unique expeditionary capability as perfectly suited for their own unique maritime/littoral challenges. Because we train with them, tailoring each event to fit our partners’ needs, the relationships are sustainable and maturing with each event.

The Marine Corps’ rebalance efforts in the Pacific are focused both on creating and strengthening partnerships with other nation’s militaries. These efforts are also aligned with

the Defense Guideline's direction for "innovative, low-cost and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security goals."

Viewed through this lens of alliances and partnership, the Defense Policy Review Initiatives (DPRI) with Japan is a major part of the rebalance. By relocating some of the Marines in Japan to Guam and other locations within the Pacific, we are ensuring that our forces are optimally positioned to be better partners and to be responsive to potential crisis. As we relocate Marines on Guam, they will be able to more rapidly respond to crises across the Pacific, increasing our range of operations in Oceania and Southeast Asia. In addition to having an existing air and sea port to facilitate rapid global deployment, Guam and the nearby Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) provides an excellent location to train with partners on areas of amphibious and expeditionary expertise. Located in the Western Pacific, they enable our forces to gather together to plan, embark, move, rehearse and conduct ship-to-shore movements, as well as conduct follow-on actions ashore. Training together in Guam/CNMI will enable our existing partnerships to advance and mature, and enable new relationships to develop.

As part of our rebalance in the Pacific, we are expanding our partnership with Australia, particularly in improving our collective amphibious and expeditionary capabilities, and our interoperability in combined-arms, live fire-and-maneuver warfare. We currently have Australian Army officers serving on several of our California-based Marine Expeditionary Units' staffs, improving their amphibious and expeditionary knowledge. For the second year, we have a Marine infantry company deployed to Darwin, Australia to live and train alongside our allies. During its six-month deployment, elements will also deploy outside Australia. Last year, our infantry company joined the US Navy in training with our partners in Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

We are excited about our strengthened partnership with Australia. Together over the next few years, we will continue to grow our amphibious and expeditionary ties, as well as improve our combined capability and capacity for bilateral combined-arms, live fire-and-maneuver training in Northwest Australia.

We are investing in our crisis response capability by upgrading our aircraft in the Pacific, replacing our oldest helicopters with MV-22 Ospreys. The Osprey provides a leap forward in speed, payload, and range. When compared to a CH-46 helicopter, the MV-22 tilt-rotor aircraft is roughly twice as fast, carries nearly three times the payload, and has approximately four times the range of operations. It can also operate at much higher altitudes and refuel while airborne. The MV-22 capabilities significantly improve the responsiveness and range of our Marines for the defense of our allies, humanitarian assistance operations, protection of vital U.S. interests, and other contingencies.

During my talks with leaders in the region, I continually emphasize that security is a collaborative responsibility, and my commitment to cooperation is unwavering. We are investing in our Marines and hardware, we are distributing our forces into appropriate compositions and geographic locations, and most importantly, we are partnering with our friends and allies who want to work together. The US commitment to the Pacific and our rebalance is indeed real. We have become the

partner of choice in the Asia-Pacific, and where there is an opportunity to partner and train in the region, there will be a US Marine.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.