

Operation Pathways: A Framework for Creating Protected Sustainment in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command

By Major Jacob C. Pressler

In March 2023, General Charles A. Flynn, U.S. Army Pacific commander, coauthored a *Defense One* article entitled “Interior Lines Will Make Land Power the Asymmetric Advantage in the Indo-Pacific: The Army is Building Compact Lines of Maneuver, Communications, and Logistics”; in it, he describes the Army role in suppressing an antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) system designed to find and target adversaries in the maritime, air, cyber, and space domains—not dispersed land forces operating within a “protective bubble.”¹ The Army fills this role by creating windows of opportunities for the joint force, primarily through long-range precision fires (LRPF) and other effects applied by the new multidomain task forces and other critical assets dispersed across the theater. This fires-centric concept relies on the continued presence of the United States and partner nations in the region to counter the magazine depth of our adversaries and deter conflict through Operation Pathways.

Enabling the “Protective Bubble”

Operation Pathways grew out of a series of exercises collectively known as Defender Pacific, which were conducted in various countries across the Pacific. The transformation occurred in 2022, when the Defender Pacific exercises developed distinct linkages, enabling the Army to establish interior lines and support key partners.² These changes required that the 8th Military Police Brigade, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, reevaluate how to enable protection at tactical and operational levels. For example, each of the individual exercises had previously occurred annually or biannually, independent of one another; however, following the transformation, the brigade initiated a 3-year plan for incremental unit participation in 16 Operation Pathways exercises in direct support of theater objectives along specific lines of effort. This approach allowed the brigade and the 728th Military Police Battalion, Schofield Barracks, to plan deliberate experimentation focused on Component III integration, littoral security, Army watercraft security, detention operations, military police company structure, and counter-small, unmanned aircraft systems within the theater. Additionally, this multi-year approach drove efforts to reevaluate military police support operations on a noncontiguous battlefield in the maritime domain and impacts on military police doctrine.

Participation in multiple exercises required that the 8th Military Police Brigade coordinate closely with Component III military police. Specifically, the relationship between the brigade and the 11th Military Police Brigade, Los Alamitos, California, ensured the availability of military police requirements for each exercise in the face of Army

force structure reductions. The integration of forces across two brigades resulted in the habitual support of the 11th Military Police Brigade for specific exercises with mixed component platoons and companies—the first of which was Keris Strike 23 in Malaysia, followed by Joint Pacific Multi-national Readiness Center Rotation 23-1 in Hawaii, where the 11th Military Police Brigade provided detention operations platoons task-organized under the 57th Military Police Company, Schofield Barracks, allowing the 728th Military Police Battalion to field and perform mission command for a full military police company in support of both exercises. This enabled both brigades to experiment with detention operations west of the International Date Line. It also allowed for the development of the connective tissue necessary for reception, staging, onward movement, and integration of Component III elements into the theater. The coalition of Pacific-aligned military police is crucial not only for enabling the 8th Military Police Brigade to effectively support operations within the theater but also for building the framework that will be central to the ability of military police to support operations beyond 90–180 days of a crisis or conflict.

Operating Across Domains

The maritime domain dominates the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility; however, as discussed in the March 2023 *Defense One* article, future success in the theater will rely on forward-positioned logistics, which refers to Army units positioned forward in the land domain in order to secure logistics nodes across the theater.³ Through participation in Operation Pathways and the analysis of identified gaps, the 8th Military Police Brigade has concluded that military police will play a significant role in littoral defense and Army watercraft security.

The Philippine archipelago is comprised of 7,641 islands spanning 1,150 miles from north to south; therefore, any area or critical-site security mission will necessarily involve near-coastal regions. Reliance on LRPF will require the movement of critical Class V supplies along sea lines of communication via Army or contracted watercraft within littoral areas. Other heavily used capabilities in this theater are joint logistics over the shore (JLOTS) and/or joint petroleum over the shore assets, which operate within the littorals and require protection. In essence, the supportive security tasks are the same regardless of whether or maritime or land domains dominate the area of responsibility; military police must be prepared to conduct these tasks no matter what theater they support.

Starting in the summer of 2023, elements from the 728th Military Police Battalion began experimenting with

critical-site security of JLOTS and joint petroleum over the shore assets in the Philippines. The lessons learned during the Salakanib 23 and Balakatan 23 exercises confirmed that military police operations within the littorals are fundamentally no different than similar missions conducted on land; missions conducted in the littorals simply occur in a different domain under more challenging conditions. For example, a critical-site security mission to protect JLOTS assets requires steps or measures that are similar to those taken to protect other critical sites, regardless of the domain. The same principle applies to Army watercraft security. Watercraft will be transporting critical Class V supplies around the littoral area of the 7,651 Philippine islands to support LRPF. These movements will require protection from Level 1 and 2 threats that may potentially be operating from these numerous islands. In essence, this will be a convoy security mission (under different conditions) in the maritime domain.

Becoming Dispersed but Not Forgotten


During any crisis or conflict in the Pacific, the Army will operate within the adversary's A2/AD bubble, as LRPF are used to suppress or degrade the ability of the adversary's system to target the joint force. Maneuver forces will seize objectives in order to place LRPF in positions of relative advantage and to better apply effects against the adversary. Detainees will need to be held closer to the forward line of troops for extended periods while the Army tries to defeat the various A2/AD systems. The division support area may be located on a particular cluster of islands or in another area with similar terrain features. A2/AD threats could deny the Army the ability to transport via air, and the demand for watercraft will be severe. As a result, military police supporting divisions will need to be prepared to hold detainees longer, further forward, and across dispersed locations until they can be relocated to a more secure area or to the theater detention facility via strategic lift.

Operation Pathways also allowed the 8th Military Police Brigade to experiment with the structure of military police companies. The nature of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command theater requires that military police operate in a more dispersed fashion than normal. Luzon, the main island of the Philippines, is approximately 460 miles long. In crisis or conflict, elements of a military police company could be conducting critical-site security of a multidomain task force firing point in North Luzon, providing protection of JLOTS in central Luzon, while another element is conducting a water security mission for Class V supplies bound for the multidomain task force firing point. This level of dispersion may seem extreme—but as discussed by General Flynn, the transition from Operation Pathways to conflict could occur overnight. U.S. forces in the region could be the only forces available for the first 90–180 days. The brigade restructured Operation Pathways-aligned units to a four-platoon/three-squad concept, which reduced capabilities within the squads but increased capacity within the platoons.

Protecting Across the Framework

The proliferation of relatively cheap small, unmanned aircraft systems (SUAS) in recent conflicts drove in-theater experimentation. One of the lessons learned from the various Operation Pathways exercises is that counter-SUAS, will be a part of every mission conducted. Units must employ individual and collective protection to degrade the effectiveness of adversary SUAS. Specifically, military police must include counter-SUAS in nearly all operations, including support provided to security operations tasks. To support a critical-site security mission, military police must now consider the air domain to be a Level 1 or 2 threat where Group 1 or 2 SUAS can easily be employed with dramatic effect. And this threat is not limited to forces on land, as SUAS also pose a threat during Army watercraft operations as the watercraft traverse the littorals transporting Class V supplies. In addition, a persistent SUAS threat will be present across the operational framework, from the strategic support area to the division close area. Military police conducting security missions within the strategic support area employ counter-SUAS at force-generating and projection locations, in transit on Army watercraft, in support of JLOTS/joint petroleum over the shore within the littorals, during critical-site security missions in support of LRPF/integrated air and missile defense/agile combat employment sites, and in the division support and close areas. The 8th Military Police Brigade has already executed this scenario during Operation Pathways and other associated exercises.

Conclusion

Operation Pathways is the mechanism that sets the U.S. Indo-Pacific theater and builds interior lines that support the joint force. Operations conducted in theaters dominated by the maritime domain (including the U.S. Indo-Pacific command theater) will require changes in how military police view their traditional mission sets. Military police will be required to conduct missions across domains and with greater dispersion amongst their elements. As the Army employs LRPF to suppress A2/AD systems and maneuver forces to seize objectives that support that mission, protecting logistics will be crucial for military police. Detention operations will occur in dispersed locations, where detainees will be held for extended periods. While these unique situations will drive change in current doctrine, they will not change our core mission of *Assist, Protect, Defend*. 

Endnotes:

¹Charles Flynn and Sarah Starr, "Interior Lines Will Make Land Power the Asymmetric Advantage in the Indo-Pacific: The Army is Building Compact Lines of Maneuver, Communications, and Logistics," *Defense One*, 15 March 2023, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2023/03/interior-lines-will-make-land-power-asymmetric-advantage-indo-pacific/384002/>, accessed on 22 July 2024.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

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