

Sharpening the Spear

By Richard Halloran

USAF photo by SSgt. Lakiha A. Croley

US Pacific Command will oversee 146 military exercises this year to build relationships and hone combat readiness.

Far more than any other military force in the Asia-Pacific region, US Pacific Command trains airmen, soldiers, sailors, and marines in an extensive array of exercises intended to give them an advantage over likely adversaries—and thus deter potential enemies.

Some of the 146 exercises on PACOM's schedule for Fiscal 2011 are those of a single service; more focus on joint training. Others are bilateral, where the US seeks to build trust and confidence in the forces of another nation. Still others are multilateral coalition-building efforts. Among the newer type of exercises is training for humanitarian operations.

Cobra Gold is representative. In the spring, all four US services are scheduled to head to Thailand to take part in Cobra Gold alongside Thai forces and those of Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, and Malaysia, with a total of 11,000 participants. The US Army and Marine Corps alternate each year as the US ground element, with the Marine Corps playing the role this

USAF photo by TSgt. Shane A. Cuomo



Left: An F-15 is refueled during December's Keen Sword exercise at Kadena AB, Japan. Above: USAF, Thai Air Force, and Singapore Air Force members track a "downed" aircraft during a Cobra Gold exercise. Below: Photographers snap a C-17 Globemaster III during 2010's RIMPAC exercise. PACOM participates in the most exercises of any military force in the region. All focus on the unique challenges of the Pacific theater.



USAF photo by TSgt. Matthew McGovern

year. In its 30th year, Cobra Gold is one of the longest running multilateral exercises, a three-week drill with an array of command post, field training, and humanitarian challenges.

In conjunction with Cobra Gold, the Marine Corps will conduct exercise Freedom Banner in which two ships from the maritime pre-position force will sail to Thailand to offload weapons, equipment, and supplies. They will then reload the ships, as getting the sequence right takes training. The gear urgently needed has to go in last so it can come off first.

In contrast to Cobra Gold, this spring's Terminal Fury exercise will be for US forces only. PACOM headquarters in Honolulu will turn into a combat command post for Adm. Robert F. Willard and staff to practice executing a large-scale operations plan.

Marine Col. Javier Ball, chief of PACOM's exercise division, said, "Leaders at all levels are involved in all phases of this training to exercise the command and control that will ensure they are ready to respond if a crisis emerges."

A similar exercise, Ellipse Charlie, will be a no-notice command post and field training exercise to evaluate communications between the staffs of PACOM and Special Operations Command Pacific and build force capabilities in another nation. Given the no-notice nature of the exercise, PACOM officials

declined to disclose when this effort would take place or what other nation is involved.

Developing Military Relations

In recent years, PACOM has put increasing emphasis on training for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, which some critics contend detracts from military readiness. "Not at all," Ball responded. "Combat readiness means being able to execute missions across the range of military options. We can move a lot of food, water, and shelters in a short time. We can bring in hospital capabilities, and we can bring in water purification units. We must be prepared to answer the call not only to assist allies and friends but to help anybody in distress."

Overall, these military exercises cost relatively little. PACOM's 2011 budget is \$140 million, out of a national defense budget of slightly more than \$700 billion. Each of the components, such as Pacific Air Forces, also has a budget of \$5 million to \$12.5 million for its own exercises. Most of those funds are spent on additional fuel and spare parts needed to transport people and equipment across the area of operations.

The purpose of exercises attended by US forces alone is, obviously, to train for war. Many grow directly out of an operational plan. Northern Edge, for instance, is a joint exercise of air,

sea, and land tactical units. It takes place across the Joint Pacific Alaska Range Complex, Joint Base Elmendorf, Eielson Air Force Base, and the Gulf of Alaska. An educated guess says the exercise trains airmen to help defend South Korea from North Korea.

When US forces get into bilateral and multilateral exercises, the training assumes a new dimension. The objective is to develop military-to-military relations that help deter a potential aggressor. In the worst case, the drills help to forge a coalition ready to go to war in combined operations. Just how effective the exercises are in deterring a potential aggressor is impossible to know. China has occasionally been invited to send observers to an exercise, but their reactions have so far been difficult to read.

Some PACOM exercises are long standing. Commando Sling is a tactical fighter exercise in which USAF sends six or so fighters to Singapore three times a year to train alongside the Republic of Singapore Air Force—or to square off against them. Key Resolve is a command post exercise with South Korea to prepare to repel an assault from

A B-52 taxis at Andersen AFB, Guam, during Green Lightning, a bilateral exercise performed with Australian joint terminal attack controllers. Of late, Australia has become increasingly important as an American ally in the Pacific region.

USAF photo by A1C Courtney Witt



North Korea. Foal Eagle is a separate but related field exercise with the same objective. Talisman Saber is a command post and field training exercise with the armed services of Australia, a longtime ally that has become even more important as PACOM has turned its attention toward the South China Sea and Southeast Asia. "The focus," said a PACOM officer, "is on high-end combat operations transitioning into peacekeeping or other post-conflict operations."

None of these exercises are aimed at a particular nation, say American officials in public. That posture is intended to preclude a diplomatic protest from an offended nation and to avoid placing an American ally or partner in a politically difficult position with another Asian nation. Even so, the "countries" in the exercises sometimes bear close resemblance to certain nations. For example, "Redland" clearly resembles China, while "Blueland" is recognizable as North Korea.

The Chinese People's Liberation Army lags well behind PACOM in size, complexity, and frequency of its exercises, according to knowledgeable officials. The PLA, encompassing all of China's military forces, conducts about a quarter of the number of exercises run by PACOM.

Yet, the PLA has come a long way in the last 25 years. At a Chinese naval base in the mid-1980s, a US naval officer on duty as an attache in Beijing was asked how much time the PLA Navy warships that were tied up to piers trained at sea. "They don't go to sea. They just chip and paint," the officer quipped. Then he relented, noting each ship ran training drills while in port and might go to sea once or twice a year. In another measure, US aviators noted three years ago that Chinese fighter pilots got seven to eight hours of flying time a month compared with the 20 to 22 hours a month USAF and the Navy sought for their pilots. An intelligence officer said a North Korean pilot would be lucky to get 20 hours of flying time a year.

PLA Navy, or PLAN, ships perform live firing exercises in the South China Sea, according to Beijing's Ministry of National Defense. The PLAN executed one such drill in July without disclosing the number or class of warships involved. The ministry reported "warships and submarines from the Navy's South China Sea Fleet performed precision strikes on surface targets by firing guided missiles." After Gen. Chen Bingde, chief

An Unrelenting Exercise Schedule

Last February, Japanese F-2 fighters flew from Tsukui Air Base southwest of Tokyo to Andersen Air Force Base on Guam to train alongside Air Force and Navy pilots in an exercise called Cope North.

In March, USAF A-10s flew from Osan Air Base in South Korea to a Thai airfield at Udon Thani to exercise with Thai and Singaporean aviators in Cope Tiger.

Then, in April, came Cope West at Halim Air Base, Indonesia; it involved flying with Indonesian aviators.

This past May, Total Force airmen and soldiers trained in Thailand with Thais and Cambodians in Operation Pacific Angel, focusing on humanitarian missions.

Another Pacific Angel took Air Force personnel to Bangladesh in June, and yet another featured a USAF team in Vietnam.

The US forces were just getting warmed up for what came next: the world's largest maritime exercise, Rim of the Pacific. RIMPAC brought together 32 ships, five submarines, 170 aircraft, and 20,000 personnel from 14 Asian, European, and Western Hemisphere nations around Hawaii in July for amphibious, air defense, and live fire drills.

In July, the F-22 deployed to South Korea for the first time ever. Several F-22s participated in a bilateral exercise, Invincible Spirit, with South Korea.

In August, medics from USAF, Mongolia, Maldives, and Sri Lanka trained together in Sri Lanka.

Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps aircraft exercised in Valiant Shield at Guam and in the central Pacific in September. It tested operational plans to defend islands in the Western Pacific belonging to allied or friendly nations.

In October's Max Thunder, the 18th Aggressor Squadron, flying F-16s with paint schemes reminiscent of Russian MiGs and Sukhois, flew from Eielson AFB, Alaska, to Kwangju, South Korea, to scrimmage against USAF and South Korean F-15s and F-16s. That same month, B-52s flew from Andersen to Australia in Exercise Hamel, in which Australian controllers guided them on close air support missions.

Finally, December's Keen Sword saw 10,500 American troops join about three times as many Japanese for a week of drills throughout Japan. The Americans were led by Lt. Gen. Herbert J. Carlisle, then commander of 13th Air Force, which plans and executes the Pacific Air Forces exercise program. The training included integrated air and missile defense, base security and force protection, search and rescue operations, and maritime interdiction.

of the PLA general staff, called on the PLAN to make a "solid preparation for military struggle," in November the PLAN conducted a similar live fire drill, including marines, to train for an amphibious invasion of Taiwan.

In the air, the PLA Air Force called out fighters, transport, and reconnaissance aircraft to participate in an exercise called Mission Action 2010, centered on a large troop maneuver in the Beijing Military Area Command. The PLAAF provided air cover, transport, and intelligence to the ground force, and participated in the joint command center (US observers have long asserted that the PLA was weak in command and control).

The Indian Connection

In a separate maneuver, the ministry reported, a mechanized infantry brigade with artillery, signal, and engineer troops undertook a long-distance maneuver last fall covering thousands of miles by air, rail, and highway, and a river crossing. The ministry noted that for three years,

troop commanders had struggled to achieve swift movements after receiving orders, the ability to overcome obstacles and win a battle at the end.

Within the last decade, the PLA has begun exercising with the forces of other nations, including some that regularly train with US forces. The PLA has sent contingents to Thailand to train with Thai marines, invited Pakistan to send units to China to exercise with the PLA in counterterror tactics, and sent units to India to train jointly in anti-terror operations.

Among the newer US exercise partners is India, with which the US does not have a mutual security treaty. The US has put on a full-court press to cultivate India, according to US officers and diplomats, because New Delhi has shucked much of its affiliation with the nonaligned movement and its reliance on Russia for military equipment and economic aid.

Although Indian and American political leaders profess not to be seek-



In July 2005, Brigadier James Baker (l), then Australian International Stabilization Force commander, and Adm. Robert Willard, then US Navy Pacific Fleet commander, shake hands after a successful meeting at Camp Phoenix in Dili, East Timor. Fictional adversary countries in exercises sometimes bear strong resemblances to real countries in the region.

ing to contain China, India is seen as a counterweight to an emerging and sometimes belligerent China. India has a long-standing border dispute with China in its northern mountainous reaches, and has become a logical strategic partner for the US. Military relations are essential to this embryonic partnership.

In October 2009, PACOM began Joint Exercise India as a staff exercise initially concentrated on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. In November 2010, about 200 Indian soldiers were flown into Joint Base Elmendorf for an exercise called Yudh Abhyas 2010, during which they performed a parachute jump from a C-17, live fire drills, and a command post exercise.

In other bilateral and multilateral exercises, the initiative for some events comes from the US, for others from allies or possible partners. “Since we actively look for opportunities to increase training with other nations, off the top of my head, I’d venture a guess” that half the exercises are US suggestions, half foreign initiatives, Ball said.

In 2009, for instance, the Indian Army asked PACOM to send a detachment of Stryker armored vehicles to train alongside Indian troops. The Strykers come in several versions, including a troop carrier and another mounting a 105 mm gun. They are relatively new but earned a good reputation in Iraq, and presumably the Indians wanted to compare them to the Soviet-era infantry vehicles with which they have long been equipped.

Lt. Col. James P. Isenhower III, then a battalion commander in the 25th Infantry Division at Schofield Barracks outside of Honolulu, led 300 soldiers with 17 Strykers that were airlifted to India. They spent a month there, mostly in hard training. After individual and small unit instruction was completed, the Indians and Americans swapped units. An American platoon was integrated into an Indian company and an Indian platoon joined an American company. Since most Indian officers spoke English, communication with Americans was easy. With Indian sergeants and enlisted soldiers, the Americans relied on arm and hand signals; this worked reasonably well. Beyond that, the troops depended on their common experience as soldiers.

No Jungle in Sight

Lt. Gen. Benjamin R. Mixon, the commanding general of US Army Pacific, has urged his soldiers to be “combat ready, technologically advanced, and culturally astute.” Experienced American officers say young Army and Marine officers and NCOs sometimes get frustrated and impatient when working with Asians for the first time. Middle-grade officers and NCOs find it easier to adapt, even if they must work hard not to overwhelm their Asian counterparts with modern US equipment and communications.

Among aviators this is less an issue. Brig. Gen. Scott D. West, vice commander of 13th Air Force, said, “All exercises are geared toward building long-lasting relations” with allies.

West said two points are critical: “We must reach an agreement on training objectives and we must respect each other’s sovereignty.”

Subtle differences emerge. An American F-16 pilot who has trained with Singaporean pilots noted the Singaporeans are more rank-conscious than Americans. In an after-action debrief, the younger pilots deferred to their seniors. In USAF, everyone is expected to speak up, although with due respect toward senior aviators.

Navy officers seem to think cultural differences are even less of a problem because sailors of each nation in an exercise sail their own ships, and most communication is in writing. Many Asians read English well, even if they are not practiced in speaking and listening. In addition, many Asian navies, like the US Navy, have historically been influenced by the British Navy, which gives them much in common.

The shorthand code names for the exercises are sometimes a puzzle. The origin of long-running exercises such as Ulchi Freedom Guardian with South Korea is lost.

Ball said a joint Defense Department publication assigns letter combinations to combatant commands. After the PACOM staff picks a name, they seek the approval of other nations involved. “We want to make sure we take cultural sensitivities into account,” he said. A few exercises have code names in an Asian language, such as Yama Sakura; it is Japanese for “Cherry Blossoms in the Mountains.”

Balikatan in Tagalog, a language of the Philippines, is “Shoulder to Shoulder.”

Yudh Abhyas in Hindi, India’s most widely spoken language, means “Training for War.”

But often the code names have little to do with the exercises. Jungle Shield, running between Andersen Air Force Base on Guam and Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam on Oahu in Hawaii, is intended to test the Air Force’s ability to protect US air lanes over the Pacific Ocean—with no jungle in sight. ■

Richard Halloran, formerly a New York Times foreign correspondent in Asia and military correspondent in Washington, D.C., is a freelance writer based in Honolulu. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “Pacific Push,” appeared in the January issue.