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The U.S. Interconnected Strategies in Indo-Pacific and the Middle East

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Background and Purpose

- **Understanding the Linkages between America's Indo-Pacific and Middle East Strategies.**
 - It is expected that American force employment in the Middle East will influence South Korea's security, both directly and indirectly via America's Indo-Pacific strategy.
 - By highlighting the linkages between the U.S. strategies in the two regions, the current research will document how the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy has theater-wide strategic implications, as well as its influence on the security situation on the Korean Peninsula.

Research Results

- **Insights about the linkages between the U.S. Indo-Pacific and Middle East Strategies.**
 - The pattern of American force employment in the Middle East shapes Washington's ability to execute its Indo-Pacific strategy.
 - Proactive employment of American naval and air assets in the Middle East does not necessarily bode well for Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. Specifically, the capacity, readiness, and capabilities of the U.S. air and naval forces are likely to be diminished as a result.
 - There is growing interdependence between the Indo-Pacific and Middle East strategies.
 - There is an increasing likelihood of Middle East strategy taking on a supporting role for Indo-Pacific strategy, and the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean is growing within the context of the supported-supporting relationship between the two strategies.

- It is expected that the dynamic employment of U.S. military forces will accelerate, in order to link the two strategies. Furthermore, the U.S. military's innovative operational concept, developed in response to China's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) threats, will also be integrated into how Washington employs its military forces across the Middle East.
- The South Korean military needs to realize the security implications of the linkage between American strategies in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific.
 - Explore ways in which the Rep. of Korea- U.S. alliance can be leveraged in the Middle East.
 - Formulate strategy that accounts for limitations in American force employment and the acceleration of dynamic force employment in Indo-Pacific.
 - Pay attention to the implications of increased the U.S. Army firepower and innovations in operational concept.



The U.S. Indo-Pacific and Middle East strategies each demonstrate the characteristics of a theater strategy. Theater strategy supports overall U.S. national strategy, by way of each component command employing military force within its respective area of responsibility (AOR). By this logic, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM, employs forces within the Indo-Pacific theater. In this vein, the operations of the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) are responsible for the Middle East as its own AOR. For comparison, deterring and defeating China is the utmost theater-wide priority for USINDOPACOM, whereas for USCENTCOM, the equivalent priority is to defeat Islamic State (IS) and deter the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The current research analyzes the linkages between Washington's Indo-Pacific and Middle East strategies, and also investigates the influence such linkages have on the security situation on the Korean Peninsula. The key premise is that American force employment in the Middle East affects the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, which then will influence Korean security both directly and indirectly. This realization reflects the underlying connections between the two U.S. strategies.

There are two important factors to consider. The first one is the influence America's Middle East strategy has on its Indo-Pacific strategy. Military



employment is relatively less important in the Middle East than it is in the Indo-Pacific, within the context of overall U.S. defense strategy. This research studies how the U.S. force employment within Indo-Pacific has been influenced by the patterns of American force employment in the Middle East. The second one is the mutual interdependence between the two theater strategies, within the context of global integration of the U.S. forces.

How, then, can U.S. abilities to implement its Indo-Pacific theater strategy be properly understood? First, in terms of capacity, there is a contrast between land and naval/air assets. In the Middle East theater, the logic of offshore balancing is increasingly becoming visible, and in the event of an all-out war with Iran, there is only a small chance that large-scale land forces will be employed. Thus, the employment of U.S. land assets in the Middle East will only have a marginal impact on securing the capacity of American land forces in the Indo-Pacific theater. It is more likely that there will be a proactive employment U.S. aircraft carrier groups and fifth-generation fighter aircraft, rather than that of land assets, throughout the Middle East. In the event of an all-out war with Iran, then, America's air force and navy, rather than its army, are likely to be the key players. It logically follows that the employment of naval and air assets in the Middle East will almost certainly constrain the build-up of naval and air capacity to implement a theater-wide strategy across the Indo-Pacific.

Second, in terms of readiness, there is also a contrast between the army on the one hand, and navy and air force on the other. If American land forces stationed in the Middle East were to be deployed to the Indo-Pacific, then this would have a positive effect on the U.S. Army's readiness posture for carrying out Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. In contrast, the increasing operational demand for American naval and air assets in the Middle East is having an adverse effect on the readiness posture of the U.S. Navy and Air Force within the Indo-Pacific region.

Third, in terms of capabilities, the employment of army and naval assets in the Middle East will not offset the capabilities of the U.S. Army and Navy to carry out the Indo-Pacific strategy. However, the fact that the U.S. Air Force is actively employing its fifth-generation fighter aircraft assets in the Middle East is weakening America's position in its strategic rivalry with China.

Table 1. The effect of U.S. military employment on Indo-Pacific theater strategy

	Army	Navy	Air Force
Capacity	Unlikely to be negative	Adverse effect on theater-wide strategy	
Readiness	Potentially positive		
Capabilities	No direct adverse effect		Offset effect

With regards to deeper interdependence between the two strategies, there is likely to be a more explicit supporting-supported relationship between them. Military employment patterns are also likely to shift accordingly.

As for the supporting-supported relationship that exists between the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific strategies, the USCENTCOM position suggests that it will provide support for the execution of Indo-Pacific strategy. And in geopolitical terms, the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean will continue to grow.

How, then, will the patterns of U.S. military force employment unfold? First, we may witness the dynamic deployment of the Navy aircraft carrier groups that connect the South China Sea with the Indian Ocean. Concomitantly, American air assets operating out of the Indian Ocean are being employed to achieve the purpose of deterring both China and Iran. This situation reflects the tandem between the two theater-wide strategies, with indications pointing to the dynamic employment of both American air and naval forces. Second, the innovative operational concept of the U.S. Army and Navy, designed to overcome anti-access/area denial (A2/AD), is highly likely to be applied to not only the Indo-Pacific, but also the Middle East theater.

For the security of the Korean peninsula, the current research identified the following suggestions from the increasing degree of linkages between the U.S. strategies in Indo-Pacific and the Middle East. First, based on an acknowledgement of the connections between the two strategies, the possibility that the ROK-US alliance playing a constructive role in the Middle East must be explored. One caveat is that an explicitly military role of the alliance is likely to create controversy; thus, if there is to a role, then it will have to be a non-military one that helps Washington achieve its strategic aims in the region.



Second, as U.S. military force employment for implementing the Indo-Pacific strategy is likely to be negatively impacted, the appropriate response ought to be formulated. There is a need to re-affirm Seoul and Washington's shared understanding and interest in maintaining the alliance between the two countries. And connections between the ROK-US alliance and America's Indo-Pacific strategy ought to be actively explored and identified.

Third, an appropriate response ought to be formulated to a potentially weakened U.S. military capabilities in Northeast Asia, a likely outcome of Washington's shift to dynamic force employment. In this vein, both Seoul and Washington would do well to re-affirm the role of the United States Forces Korea (USFK) in deterring North Korea based on the combined defense capabilities of the two countries.

Fourth, an appropriate response must be formulated to prepare for additional firepower of U.S. land forces across the Indo-Pacific region. If there is a need for additional firepower on the part of the land forces under the USFK command, prior consultation between Seoul and Washington will have to be undertaken. Shifting firepower will have to serve the purpose of strengthening deterrence against North Korea.

Fifth, attention must be paid to how the U.S. innovation of operational concept to overcome China's A2/AD threats will be relevant to the ROK-US alliance. Washington will not only endeavor to deepen the links between its Middle East and Indo-Pacific strategies, but it will also seek to increase the reach of its operational innovations within Indo-Pacific. This means that the aforementioned innovations will be applied to the ROK-US alliance. Thus the Korean military should correctly understand the shifts that are occurring within the U.S. military with respect to operational concept. As the South Korean military prepares to build an integrated and streamlined command & control (C2) system in the post-OPCON transition era, acquiring such knowledge becomes an even more important priority.

** These research findings are the personal opinions of the author, and do not reflect the official view of the Korea Institute for Defense Analysis (KIDA).*