

The Persistent Myth of US Precision Bombing

U.S. media routinely repeat Pentagon talking points about the accuracy of U.S. bombing, but how precise are these attacks, asks Nicolas J.S. Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

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Opinion polls in the United States and the United Kingdom have found that a majority of the public in both countries has a remarkably consistent belief that only about 10,000 Iraqis were killed as a result of the U.S.-British invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Estimates of deaths in Iraq actually range from 150,000 to 1.2 million. Part of the reason for the seriously misguided public perception may come from a serious belief in guided weapons, according to what the government tells people about “precision” bombing. But one must ask how so many people can be killed if these weapons are so “precise,” for instance in one of “the most precise air campaigns in military history,” as a Pentagon spokesman characterized the total destruction last year of Raqqa in Syria.

The dreadful paradox of “precision weapons” is that the more the media and the public are wrongly persuaded of the near-magical qualities of these weapons, the easier it is for U.S. military and civilian leaders to justify using them to destroy entire villages, towns and cities in country after country: Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul in Iraq; Sangin and Musa Qala in Afghanistan; Sirte in Libya; Kobane and Raqqa in Syria.

An Imprecise History

The skillful use of disinformation about “precision” bombing has been essential to the development of aerial bombardment as a strategic weapon. In a World War II propaganda pamphlet titled the “Ultimate Weapon of Victory”, the U.S. government hailed the B-17 bomber as “... the mightiest bomber ever built... equipped with the incredibly accurate

Norden bomb sight, which hits a 25-foot circle from 20,000 feet.”

However, according to the website WW2Weapons, “With less than 50 percent cloud coverage an average B-17 Fortress Group could be expected to place 32.4% of its bombs within 1000 feet of the aiming point when aiming visually.” That could rise to 60 percent if flying at the dangerously low altitude of 11,000 feet in daylight.

The U.K.’s 1941 Butt Report found that only five percent of British bombers were dropping their bombs within five miles of their targets, and that 49 percent of their bombs were falling in “open country.”

In the “Dehousing Paper,” the U.K. government’s chief scientific adviser argued that mass aerial bombardment of German cities to “dehouse” and break the morale of the civilian population would be more effective than “precision” bombing aimed at military targets. British leaders agreed, and adopted this new approach: “area” or “carpet” bombing, with the explicit strategic purpose of “dehousing” Germany’s civilian population.

The U.S. soon adopted the same strategy against both Germany and Japan, and a U.S. airman quoted in the post-war U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey lampooned efforts at “precision” bombing as a “major assault on German agriculture.”

The destruction of North Korea by U.S.-led bombing and shelling in the Korean War was so total that U.S. military leaders estimated that they’d killed 20 percent of its population.

In the American bombing of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the U.S. dropped more bombs than all sides combined in the Second World War, with full scale use of horrific napalm and cluster bombs. The whole world recoiled from this mass slaughter, and even the U.S. was chastened into scaling back its military ambitions for at least a decade.

The American War in Vietnam saw the introduction of the “laser-guided smart bomb,” but the Vietnamese soon learned that the smoke from a small fire or a burning tire was enough to confuse its guidance

system. "They'd go up, down, sideways, all over the place," a GI told Douglas Valentine, the author of *The Phoenix Program*. "And people would smile and say, 'There goes another smart bomb!' So smart a gook with a match and an old tire can fuck it up."

Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome

President Bush Senior hailed the First Gulf War as the moment that America "kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all." Deceptive information about "precision" bombing played a critical role in revitalizing U.S. militarism after defeat in Vietnam.

The U.S. and its allies ruthlessly carpet-bombed Iraq, reducing it from what a UN report later called "a rather highly urbanized and mechanized society" to "a pre-industrial age nation." But the Western media enthusiastically swallowed Pentagon briefings and broadcast round-the-clock bomb-sight footage of a handful of successful "precision" strikes as if they were representative of the entire campaign. Later reports revealed that only seven percent of the 88,500 tons of bombs and missiles devastating Iraq were "precision" weapons.

The U.S. turned the bombing of Iraq into a marketing exercise for the U.S. war industry, dispatching pilots and planes straight from Kuwait to the Paris Air Show. The next three years saw record U.S. weapons exports, offsetting small reductions in U.S. arms procurement after the end of the Cold War.

The myth of "precision" bombing that helped Bush and the Pentagon "kick the Vietnam syndrome" was so successful that it has become a template for the Pentagon's management of news in subsequent U.S. bombing campaigns. It also gave us the disturbing euphemism "collateral damage" to indicate civilians killed by errant bombs.

'Shock and Awe'

As the U.S. and U.K. launched their "Shock and Awe" attack on Iraq in 2003, Rob Hewson, the editor of *Jane's Air-Launched Weapons*, estimated about 20-25 percent of the U.S. and U.K.'s

“precision” weapons were missing their targets in Iraq, noting that this was a significant improvement over the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, when 30-40 percent were off-target. “There’s a significant gap between 100 percent and reality,” Hewson said. “And the more you drop, the greater your chances of a catastrophic failure.”

Since World War II, the U.S. Air Force has loosened its definition of “accuracy” from 25 feet to 10 meters (39 feet), but that is still less than the blast radius of even its smallest 500 lb. bombs. So the impression that these weapons can be used to surgically “zap” a single house or small building in an urban area without inflicting casualties and deaths throughout the surrounding area is certainly contrived.

“Precision” weapons comprised about two thirds of the 29,200 weapons aimed at the armed forces, people and infrastructure of Iraq in 2003. But the combination of 10,000 “dumb” bombs and 4,000 to 5,000 “smart” bombs and missiles missing their targets meant that about half of “Shock and Awe’s” weapons were as indiscriminate as the carpet bombing of previous wars. Saudi Arabia and Turkey asked the U.S. to stop firing cruise missiles through their territory after some went so far off-target that they struck their territory. Three also hit Iran.

“In a war that’s being fought for the benefit of the Iraqi people, you can’t afford to kill any of them,” a puzzled Hewson said. “But you can’t drop bombs and not kill people. There’s a real dichotomy in all of this.”

‘Precision’ Bombing Today

Since Barack Obama started the bombing of Iraq and Syria in 2014 more than 107,000 bombs and missiles have been launched. U.S. officials claim only a few hundred civilians have been killed. The British government persists in the utterly fantastic claim that none of its 3,700 bombs have killed any civilians at all.

Former Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari, a Kurd from Mosul, told Patrick Cockburn of Britain’s *Independent* newspaper that he’d seen Kurdish military intelligence reports that U.S. airstrikes and U.S.,

French and Iraqi artillery had killed at least 40,000 civilians in his hometown, with many more bodies still buried in the rubble. Almost a year later, this remains the only remotely realistic official estimate of the civilian death toll in Mosul. But no other mainstream Western media have followed up on it.

The consequences of U.S. air wars are hidden in plain sight, in endless photos and videos. The Pentagon and the corporate media may suppress the evidence, but the mass death and destruction of American aerial bombardment are only too real to the millions of people who have survived it.

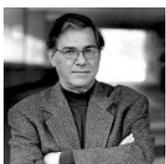
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The Pentagon Expands Its Provocative Encirclement of China

It failed to make headlines, but the recent change in name of the U.S. Pacific Command is an ominous sign of a coming U.S. confrontation with China, argues Michael T. Klare.

By Michael T. Klare



U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis announced a momentous shift in American global strategic policy in a little noticed statement on May 30.

From now on, he decreed, the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), which oversees all U.S. military forces in Asia, will be called the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). The name change, Mattis explained, reflects “the increasing

connectivity between the Indian and Pacific Oceans,” as well as Washington’s determination to remain the dominant power in both.

Such a name change may not sound like much, but someday you may look back and realize that it couldn’t have been more consequential or ominous. Think of it as a signal that the U.S. military is already setting the stage for eventual confrontation with China.

If, until now, you hadn’t read about Mattis’s decision anywhere, it’s not surprising as the media gave it virtually no attention – less certainly than would have been accorded the least significant tweet Donald Trump ever dispatched. What coverage it did receive treated the name change as no more than a passing “symbolic” gesture, a Pentagon ploy to encourage India to join Japan, Australia, and other U.S. allies in America’s Pacific alliance system.

“In Symbolic Nod to India, U.S. Pacific Command Changes Name” was the headline of a Reuters story on the subject and, to the extent that any attention was paid, it was typical.

That the media’s military analysts failed to notice anything more than symbolism in the deep-sixing of PACOM shouldn’t be surprising, given all the attention being paid to other major international developments – the pyrotechnics of the Korean summit in Singapore, the insults traded at and after the G7 meeting in Canada, or the ominous gathering storm over Iran.

Add to this the poor grasp so many journalists have of the nature of the U.S. military’s strategic thinking. Still, Mattis himself has not been shy about the geopolitical significance of linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans in such planning. In fact, it represents a fundamental shift in U.S. military thinking with potentially far-reaching consequences.

Threatening Language

Consider the backdrop to the name change: in recent months, the U.S. has stepped up its naval patrols in waters adjacent to Chinese-occupied islands in the South China Sea (as has China), raising the prospect of future clashes between the warships of the two countries. Such moves have been accompanied by ever more threatening language from the Department of Defense (DoD), indicating an intent to do nothing less than engage China militarily if that country’s build-up in the region continues. “When it comes down to introducing what they have done in the South China Sea, there are consequences,” Mattis declared at the Shangri La Strategic Dialogue in Singapore on June 2nd.

As a preliminary indication of what he meant by this, Mattis promptly disinvited the Chinese from the world’s largest multinational naval

exercise, the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), conducted annually under American auspices. “But that’s a relatively small consequence,” he added ominously, “and I believe there are much larger consequences in the future.” With that in mind, he soon announced that the Pentagon is planning to conduct “a steady drumbeat” of naval operations in waters abutting those Chinese-occupied islands, which should raise the heat between the two countries and could create the conditions for a miscalculation, a mistake, or even an accident at sea that might lead to far worse.

In addition to its plans to heighten naval tensions in seas adjacent to China, the Pentagon has been laboring to strengthen its military ties with U.S.-friendly states on China’s perimeter, all clearly part of a long-term drive, in Cold War fashion, to “contain” Chinese power in Asia.

On June 8th, for example, the DoD launched Malabar 2018, a joint Pacific Ocean naval exercise involving forces from India, Japan, and the United States. Incorporating once neutral India into America’s anti-Chinese “Pacific” alliance system in this and other ways has, in fact, become a major twenty-first-century goal of the Pentagon, posing a significant new threat to China.

For decades, the principal objective of U.S. strategy in Asia had been to bolster key Pacific allies Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, while containing Chinese power in adjacent waters, including the East and South China Seas. However, in recent times, China has sought to spread its influence into Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region, in part by extolling its staggeringly ambitious “One Belt, One Road” trade and infrastructure initiative for the Eurasian continent and Africa.

That vast project is clearly meant both as a unique vehicle for cooperation and a way to tie much of Eurasia into a future China-centered economic and energy system. Threatened by visions of such a future, American strategists have moved ever more decisively to constrain Chinese outreach in those very areas. That, then, is the context for the sudden concerted drive by U.S. military strategists to link the Indian and Pacific Oceans and so encircle China with pro-American, anti-Chinese alliance systems. The name change on May 30 is a formal acknowledgement of an encirclement strategy that couldn’t, in the long run, be more dangerous.

‘Many Belts and Many Roads’

To grasp the ramifications of such moves, some background on the former PACOM might be useful. Originally known as the Far East Command, PACOM was established in 1947 and has been headquartered at U.S. bases near Honolulu, Hawaii, ever since. As now constituted, its “area of responsibility” encompasses

a mind-boggling expanse: all of East, South, and Southeast Asia, as well as Australia, New Zealand, and the waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans – in other words, an area covering about 50 percent of the Earth’s surface and incorporating more than half of the global population.

Though the Pentagon divides the whole planet like a giant pie into a set of “unified commands,” none of them is larger than the newly expansive, newly named Indo-Pacific Command, with its 375,000 military and civilian personnel.

Before the Indian Ocean was explicitly incorporated into its fold, PACOM mainly focused on maintaining control of the western Pacific, especially in waters around a number of friendly island and peninsula states like Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines.

Its force structure has largely been composed of air and naval squadrons, along with a large Marine Corps presence on the Japanese island of Okinawa. Its most powerful combat unit is the U.S. Pacific Fleet – like the area it now covers, the largest in the world. It’s made up of the 3rd and 7th Fleets, which together have approximately 200 ships and submarines, nearly 1,200 aircraft, and more than 130,000 sailors, pilots, Marines, and civilians.

On a day-to-day basis, until recently, the biggest worry confronting the command was the possibility of a conflict with nuclear-armed North Korea. During the late fall of 2017 and the winter of 2018, PACOM engaged in a continuing series of exercises designed to test its forces’ ability to overcome North Korean defenses and destroy its major military assets, including nuclear and missile facilities. These were undoubtedly intended, above all, as a warning to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un about what he could expect if he continued down the path of endless provocative missile and nuclear tests. It seems that, at least for the time being, President Trump has suspended such drills as a result of his summit meeting with Kim.

North Korea aside, the principal preoccupation of PACOM commanders has long been the rising power of China and how to contain it. This was evident at the May 30 ceremony in Hawaii at which Mattis announced that expansive name change and presided over a change-of-command ceremony, in which outgoing commander, Admiral Harry Harris Jr., was replaced by Admiral Phil Davidson. (Given the naval-centric nature of its mission, the command is almost invariably headed by an admiral.)

‘Ready to Confront Them When We Must’

While avoiding any direct mention of China in his opening remarks, Mattis left not a smidgeon of uncertainty that the command’s new name was a challenge and a

call for the future mobilization of regional opposition across a vast stretch of the planet to China's dreams and desires. Other nations welcome U.S. support, he insisted, as they prefer an environment of "free, fair, and reciprocal trade not bound by any nation's predatory economics or threat of coercion, for the Indo-Pacific has many belts and many roads." No one could mistake the meaning of that.

Departing Admiral Harris was blunter still. Although "North Korea remains our most immediate threat," he declared, "China remains our biggest long-term challenge." He then offered a warning: without the stepped-up efforts of the U.S. and its allies to constrain Beijing, "China will realize its dream of hegemony in Asia."

Yes, he admitted, it was still possible to cooperate with the Chinese on limited issues, but we should "stand ready to confront them when we must." (On May 18, Admiral Harris was nominated by President Trump as the future U.S. ambassador to South Korea, which will place a former military man at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul.)

Harris's successor, Admiral Davidson, seems, if anything, even more determined to put confronting China atop the command's agenda. During his confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee on April 17, he repeatedly highlighted the threat posed by Chinese military activities in the South China Sea and promised to resist them vigorously.

"Once [the South China Sea islands are] occupied, China will be able to extend its influence thousands of miles to the south and project power deep into Oceania," he warned. "The PLA [People's Liberation Army] will be able to use these bases to challenge U.S. presence in the region, and any forces deployed to the islands would easily overwhelm the military forces of any other South China Sea claimants. In short, China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States."

Is that, then, what Admiral Davidson sees in our future? War with China in those waters?

His testimony made it crystal clear that his primary objective as head of the Indo-Pacific Command will be nothing less than training and equipping the forces under him for just such a future war, while enlisting the militaries of as many allies as possible in the Pentagon's campaign to encircle that country. "To prevent a situation where China is more likely to win a conflict," he affirmed in his version of Pentagonese, "we must resource high-end capabilities in a timely fashion, preserve our network of allies and partners, and continue to recruit and train the best soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and

coastguardsmen in the world.”

Davidson’s first priority is to procure advanced weaponry and integrate it into the command’s force structure, ensuring that American combatants will always enjoy a technological advantage over their Chinese counterparts in any future confrontation.

Almost as important, he, like his predecessors, seeks to bolster America’s military ties with other members of the contain-China club. This is where India comes in. Like the United States, its leadership is deeply concerned with China’s expanding presence in the Indian Ocean region, including the opening of a future port/naval base in Gwadar, Pakistan, and another potential one on the island of Sri Lanka, both in the Indian Ocean.

Not surprisingly, given the periodic clashes between Chinese and Indian forces along their joint Himalayan borderlands and the permanent deployment of Chinese warships in the Indian Ocean, India’s prime minister Narendra Modi has shown himself to be increasingly disposed to join Washington in military arrangements aimed at limiting China’s geopolitical reach.

“An enduring strategic partnership with India comports with U.S. goals and objectives in the Indo-Pacific,” Admiral Davidson said in his recent congressional testimony. Once installed as commander, he continued, “I will maintain the positive momentum and trajectory of our burgeoning strategic partnership.” His particular goal: to “increase maritime security cooperation.”

And so we arrive at the Indo-Pacific Command and a future shadowed by the potential for great power war.

The View from Beijing

The way the name change at PACOM was covered in the U.S., you would think it reflected, at most, a benign wish for greater economic connections between the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions, as well, perhaps, as a nod to America’s growing relationship with India. Nowhere was there any hint that what might lie behind it was a hostile and potentially threatening new approach to China – or that it could conceivably be perceived that way in Beijing. But there can be no doubt that the Chinese view such moves, including recent provocative naval operations in the disputed Paracel Islands of the South China Sea, as significant perils.

When, in late May, the Pentagon dispatched two warships – the USS *Higgins*, a destroyer, and the USS *Antietam*, a cruiser – into the waters near one of those newly fortified islands, the Chinese responded by sending in some of their own warships while issuing a statement condemning the provocative American naval

patrols. The U.S. action, saida Chinese military spokesperson, “seriously violated China’s sovereignty [and] undermined strategic mutual trust.” Described by the Pentagon as “freedom of navigation operations” (FRONOPs), such patrols are set to be increased at the behest of Mattis.

Of course, the Chinese are hardly blameless in the escalating tensions in the region. They have continued to militarize South China Sea islands whose ownership is in dispute, despite a promise that Chinese President Xi Jinping made to President Obama in 2015 not to do so. Some of those islands in the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos are also claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines, and other countries in the area and have been the subject of intensifying, often bitter disagreements among them about where rightful ownership really lies.

Beijing has simply claimed sovereignty over all of them and refuses to compromise on the issue. By fortifying them – which American military commanders see as a latent military threat to U.S. forces in the region – Beijing has provoked a particularly fierce U.S. reaction, though these are obviously waters relatively close to China, but many thousands of miles from the continental United States.

From Beijing, the strategic outlook articulated by Secretary Mattis, as well as Admirals Harris and Davidson, is clearly viewed—and not without reason—as threatening and as evidence of Washington’s master plan to surround China, confine it, and prevent it from ever achieving the regional dominance its leaders believe is its due as the rising great power on the planet.

To the Chinese leadership, changing PACOM’s name to the Indo-Pacific Command will just be another signal of Washington’s determination to extend its unprecedented military presence westward from the Pacific around Southeast Asia into the Indian Ocean and so further restrain the attainment of what it sees as China’s legitimate destiny.

However Chinese leaders end up responding to such strategic moves, one thing is certain: they will not view them with indifference.

On the contrary, as challenged great powers have always done, they will undoubtedly seek ways to counter America’s containment strategy by whatever means are at hand. These may not initially be overtly military or even obvious, but in the long run they will certainly be vigorous and persistent.

They will include efforts to compete with Washington in pursuit of Asian allies – as seen in Beijing’s fervent courtship of President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines – and to secure new basing arrangements abroad, possibly under the pretext, as in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, of establishing commercial shipping

terminals. All of this will only add new tensions to an already anxiety-inducing relationship with the United States. As ever more warships from both countries patrol the region, the likelihood that accidents will occur, mistakes will be made, and future military clashes will result can only increase.

With the possibility of war with North Korea fading in the wake of the recent Singapore summit, one thing is guaranteed: the new U.S. Indo-Pacific Command will only devote itself ever more fervently to what is already its one overriding priority: preparing for a conflict with China.

Its commanders insist that they do not seek such a war, and believe that their preparations – by demonstrating America’s strength and resolve – will deter the Chinese from ever challenging American supremacy. That, however, is a fantasy.

In reality, a strategy that calls for a “steady drumbeat” of naval operations aimed at intimidating China in waters near that country will create ever more possibilities, however unintended, of sparking the very conflagration that it is, at least theoretically, designed to prevent.

Right now, a Sino-American war sounds like the plot-line of some half-baked dystopian novel. Unfortunately, given the direction in which both countries (and their militaries) are heading, it could, in the relatively near future, become a grim reality.

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