

Indo-Pacific Policy More Complex Than Only China and Russia



Panelists discuss the complexities of a region dominated by two near-peer superpowers but also full of friendly nations. Seapower / Victoria Bottlick

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – As the nation grapples with striking a balance between competing with great power challenges and preparing for the possibility of conflict, the Indo-Pacific region poses perhaps the most significant challenge, Dr. Mara Karlin believes.

Karlin, director of strategic studies at the Johns Hopkins School of International Studies, made that observation as she introduced a panel of four military and civilian government experts, each of whom plays a key role in formulating related policies in the region.

It stands to reason that each panelist recognized the increasing threats posed by China and Russia. Still, they noted that the matrix is considerably more complicated.

Eyes cannot be focused on the two large superpowers at the expense of other friendly nations in the region. Also, while China and Russia loom as potential adversaries, it is imperative that the U.S. and its partners work as closely together with them on areas of common interest.

Representing the Coast Guard and Marine Corps, Vice Adm. Linda Fagan and Gayle Von Eckartsburg discussed how each respective service shares a forward-deployed mission that makes their presence essential in the Pacific. Both Fagan and Von Eckartsburg emphasized that neither service is a “garrison force.”

“The Coast Guard has never been more relevant,” said Fagan, the service’s Pacific Area commander. “The demand for the signal we bring into the region has never been higher.”

Besides watching Chinese and Russian activities and fostering goodwill among allies, Fagan placed equal importance in “modeling legitimate behavior,” so that “China can see what a responsible Coast Guard looks like.”

If the Chinese can learn from the U.S. Coast Guard how to conduct, for example, more effective search-and-rescue operations, so be it.

Von Eckartsburg, director of the Marine Corps Pacific Division office of Plans, Policy and Operations, described a “persistent forward force.” Of the roughly 40,000 Marines now deployed around the world, the vast majority is west of the International Dateline, she said.

“We’re in a constant state of motion, leveraging presence to

maintain readiness
at the same time," Von Eckartsburg said.

Joel Szabat the
Assistant Secretary of Transportation for Aviation and
International Affairs,
discussed the three most important "pillars" of stability in
the region –
economy, governance and security.

"We need to
remember that this is not about containing or encircling any
one country,"
Szabat said. "We want to help people, regardless of who our
competitors are."

Security commitments
with U.S. allies would assure the free flow of commerce,
Szabat said. The
nation faces significant related challenges in this arena, he
believes. U.S.
sealift is old and needs to be recapitalized, he said. The
size of the U.S.
merchant fleet, which handles much of the military's sealift
capability, is
good enough for small-to-medium operations.

"We don't have
enough mariners, or U.S.-flagged merchant marine," Szabat
said.

Walter Douglas,
who heads the State Department Bureau of East Asian and
Pacific Affairs, cited
an Asian Development Bank statistic that states the region
needs an estimated
\$1.7 trillion in investment to sustain healthy economic
growth.

“There’s nowhere near that amount of money available in one state,” Szabat said.

The emphasis, then, would be to have “money centers” and corporations step in with “transparent” investments. The government and private sectors would ensure that such funding would not be subject to the troubles endemic to secret deals.

“That money gets spent in the wrong places,” Szabat said. “We can’t have that. We need open governance. We have to see [to it] that investment laws are transparent.”

Equally imperative, Douglas said, is working to ensure that investments are evenly distributed. While putting money into traditional stable partners like Japan, Australia and Singapore would remain important, more could be done to help open emerging economies. He said that Vietnam, for example, badly wants help developing its infrastructure – from anywhere but China.