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## **Military Engagement and Forward Presence: Down but Not Out as Tools to Shape and Win**

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# MILITARY ENGAGEMENT AND FORWARD PRESENCE: DOWN BUT NOT OUT AS TOOLS TO SHAPE AND WIN

John R. Deni





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## FOREWORD

Although different U.S. Presidential administrations often face differing national security challenges, one element common to all American Presidents is the desire for policy options when it comes to managing those challenges. Options provide room for maneuver strategically, operationally, and politically. In this monograph, the U.S. Army War College's Dr. John R. Deni argues that some persistent biases and some more recent trends in defense strategy, planning, and budgeting are likely to have the effect of reducing the options available to current and future senior U.S. leaders.

The drawdown of U.S. ground forces from Europe and elsewhere overseas, the return to a focus on major interstate war, the assumption that DoD-led security cooperation detracts from readiness, and the high-profile failure to build capable security forces in places like Iraq and Afghanistan have combined to frustrate American efforts to protect itself, its allies, and its interests. More specifically, these factors have weakened the effectiveness of forward presence and military engagement when it comes to protecting the homeland, conducting counterterrorism operations, assuring allies, and deterring aggressors. In their place, precision strike stand-off capabilities and a strategy of surging American military might from the United States after a crisis has already started have become more attractive policy choices.


However, Dr. Deni posits that these are inherently limited tools, diminishing U.S. influence abroad, incentivizing aggression on the part of adversaries, and ultimately reducing options available to senior American leaders. In their place, Dr. Deni convincingly

argues that forward presence and military engagement remain effective, efficient tools in the policy toolbox available to senior leaders. The author is careful to note though that there are some key caveats. First, permanent forward presence—vice merely rotational presence—is particularly beneficial, and potentially not as expensive as commonly assumed, when it comes to assurance and deterrence. Second, military engagement is not a panacea, and policymakers must take care to understand when and where DoD-led security cooperation will have a positive, lasting impact.

Nevertheless, permanent forward presence and carefully targeted military engagement can be highly effective, cost-efficient methods for safeguarding vital and important U.S. interests. They do this by shaping the security environment, preparing U.S. and allied militaries for joint operations, and ultimately contributing to the ability of American and allied troops to prevail in a variety of conflicts—from major interstate war to far messier stability operations. Given the array of challenges facing the United States today—including Russian aggression in Ukraine, China’s island-building in the South China Sea, the Islamic State’s consolidation of territory in Iraq and Syria, occasional North Korea saber rattling, and Iran’s ongoing sponsorship of terrorism—it seems a particularly useful time to seek out policy tools that create options for policymakers in an effective and efficient manner.

The Strategic Studies Institute is therefore pleased to offer this monograph as a contribution to the continuing debate on the mission, roles, structure, and composition of U.S. military forces. Dr. Deni’s analysis and argumentation should prove particularly relevant to defense strategists, planners, and force structure analysts as they contemplate how best to

shape and employ the U.S. military in protecting and promoting American interests. More specifically, Dr. Deni's work should benefit those seeking a better understanding of how political leaders at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue can more effectively wield two often underappreciated tools in the policy toolbox—forward presence and military engagement.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute and  
U.S. Army War College Press

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN R. DENI is a research professor of joint, inter-agency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) security studies at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute (SSI). He is also an adjunct lecturer at the American University's School of International Service. Previously, he worked for 8 years as a political advisor for senior U.S. military commanders in Europe. Prior to that, he spent 2 years as a strategic planner specializing in U.S. security cooperation and military-to-military relations. While working for the U.S. military in Europe, Dr. Deni was also an adjunct lecturer at Heidelberg University's Institute for Political Science. There, he taught graduate and undergraduate courses on U.S. foreign and security policy, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), European security, and alliance theory and practice. Dr. Deni has spoken at conferences and symposia throughout Europe and North America. He is the author, editor, or co-editor of five books, including *Alliance Management and Maintenance: Restructuring NATO for the 21st Century*, and he has written several peer-reviewed monographs and journal articles. Dr. Deni holds degrees from the College of William & Mary, American University, and George Washington University.

## SUMMARY

Reliance on precision strike stand-off capabilities and a strategy of surging American military might from the continental United States (CONUS) after a crisis has already started have become particularly attractive approaches for managing insecurity in a more resource-constrained environment. However, the security challenges facing the United States and its vital interests over the coming years require more than a retreat to “Fortress America.” Relying on stand-off capabilities and surge readiness cannot provide adequate deterrence or reassurance, promote effective regional security, or build the capability and interoperability necessary to succeed in combined military operations at reasonable cost, and will have the effect of reducing, not expanding, options available to any President. Mitigating the security challenges of tomorrow necessitates investment in a more effective and more efficient set of tools.

Two such tools – forward presence and, when employed selectively, military engagement – can help to promote stability and security in contexts short of major interstate war. Moreover, engagement and presence can also contribute dramatically to operational capacity and capability across a range of military operations, including major interstate war. Military engagement and forward presence have been essential tools allowing the United States to wield influence around the globe, yielding greater stability in peacetime and greater effectiveness in times of conflict, yet both are imperiled today.

Military engagement programs – often referred to as security cooperation – enable the United States to achieve the following strategic objectives:

- Enhance the ability of America’s foreign partners to maintain stability and security in their own neighborhoods;
- Deter adversaries;
- Assure allies;
- Develop the capabilities of coalition partners for current and future operations;
- Improve the ability of U.S. forces to operate with international partners; and,
- Reduce the number of American boots on the ground in a military operation.

However, there is a longstanding—and incorrect—assumption that military engagement detracts from readiness. In fact, the opposite is true—military engagement contributes directly to unit readiness by building and maintaining coalition capability and interoperability. Other critics cite the examples of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, concluding that military engagement does not work. In reality, the evidence is far more nuanced and other successful cases can shed light on when, where, and how engagement works.

Like military engagement, forward presence provides an effective and efficient means of achieving several U.S. strategic objectives, including:

- Deterring aggression against vital interests more effectively than CONUS-based forces;
- Assuring allies through a tangible U.S. commitment;
- Enabling a more effective response to security crises when and if they occur by being closer to crises;
- Providing access to en route infrastructure and the lines of communication necessary for collective defense and specific U.S. and allied operations; and,

- Contributing directly to building and maintaining interoperability with America's most likely and most capable coalition partners.

Some have argued that rotational deployment models are a good substitute for permanent presence. However, a rotationally deployed force from CONUS is unlikely to deter effectively because it is unable to prevent "opportunity motivated" aggressors—especially nuclear-armed ones—from seeking a fait accompli with a quick, successful military operation occurring between rotations. Moreover, a rotational deployment from CONUS during a period of insecurity is likely to be interpreted as escalatory.

Additionally, rotationally deployed forces from CONUS are unlikely to arrive in theater as well-informed about local or regional culture, habits, standard operating procedures, and rules and regulations. Finally, arguments favoring rotational deployments based on cost are somewhat misleading and not necessarily reflective of data from recent rotational deployments to Europe.

The inability to surge quickly enough, the incorrect assumptions about reduced cost, the risks of appearing escalatory, the loss of global influence, and the failure to deter and assure are all concomitant with a strategy of surging as circumstances demand and/or relying on stand-off capabilities. Continuing pockets of institutional bias against engagement as a force multiplier and readiness enhancer and significant cuts to overseas permanent presence have combined to limit the leverage possible through engagement and forward presence. Reversing these trends will require bureaucratic courage and leadership, and a deeper institutional embrace of engagement as well as forward presence.





**MILITARY ENGAGEMENT AND  
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**John R. Deni, PhD<sup>1</sup>**

The 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS) contends that “U.S. forces will continue to defend the homeland, conduct global counterterrorism operations, assure allies, and deter aggression *through forward presence and engagement.*”<sup>2</sup> However, four factors imperil the ability of U.S. military forces to fulfill these objectives. The first is a relentless, fiscally ill-informed, strategically and operationally short-sighted drawdown of the permanent forward presence of U.S. forces, particularly U.S. Army forces in Europe. Practically all of the arguments made over the last 15 years against continued drawdown of U.S. permanent forward presence—especially in terms of the difficulty, costliness, and effectiveness of surging from bases in the continental United States (CONUS) at levels sufficient to assure and deter—have proven to be true.

The second factor is a return to a focus on major interstate war. Related to this is unwarranted confidence in the ability of senior U.S. leaders to discern vital interests from merely important ones and thereby avoiding messier conflicts and crises. The most likely, more demanding missions—involving non-state forces disrupting the international order for example—are ones that the U.S. military may not be trained, equipped, or structured for.

The third factor is the longstanding incorrect assumption that military engagement detracts from readiness. Although views are evolving in this area, the ability to work with foreign partners or to be capable of participating in coalitions is not yet part of unit readiness reports, for instance.

Finally, the fourth factor is the lack of success in building capable indigenous security forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, despite a massive U.S. and allied effort. The 2014 collapse of Iraqi army units in the face of an Islamic State attack and the more recent capture of Kunduz by the Taliban have led many to conclude that military engagement for the purposes of building partner capacity and foreign internal defense simply does not work. In reality, the evidence is far more nuanced, and other successful cases are dismissed or ignored in a rush to judgement.

Despite the inhibiting effects of these four factors, forward presence and military engagement remain important tools for the United States to address the most likely security challenges of the next several years as well as the less likely but arguably more consequential threat of major interstate war. In fact, military engagement, when applied selectively, and forward presence represent highly effective and efficient means of protecting and promoting vital U.S. interests – arguably far more effectively than relying on a “surge” of American forces abroad during a crisis. This monograph will first assess the strategic context and the security environment of the foreseeable future. The monograph will then describe and explain how carefully targeted military engagement and forward presence – especially permanent presence – are two effective and efficient tools to enable fulfillment of U.S. national security objectives such as those laid out in the 2015 NSS.

## **Conflict and Strategic Context.**

The United States remains the only superpower in the world – the only country that can decisively wield dominating political, economic, and military influence anywhere. Like any country though, it faces threats and challenges both internal and external. Internally, the greatest challenge facing the United States is to discern vital interests from important or merely tertiary ones. American involvement in Vietnam beginning in the early 1960s and in Iraq during most of the previous decade are two cases in which the United States proved unable to draw distinctions between vital and important interests, resulting in errors of strategic magnitude with commensurate negative impacts on U.S. power and influence. While such a meta-level challenge remains ever-present for a country with the ability to intervene anywhere, this section will focus primarily on the external threats.

During his June 2015 confirmation hearing, General Joseph Dunford argued that Russia is the most significant national security threat confronting the United States today, primarily because of its extensive nuclear arsenal as well as the erratic behavior of President Vladimir Putin. Dunford’s argument made great sense, but he could have conceivably argued for China, North Korea, or Iran as the greatest threat, since each of these state actors pose significant challenges to U.S. national security. Recent U.S. strategies, such as the 2015 National Military Strategy (NMS), the 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS), and the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), as well as the major defense acquisition programs now underway and on the horizon, make it clear that the United States remains largely focused on state adver-

saries.<sup>3</sup> The rationale for this is quite simple—as the 2015 NMS notes, states are still the dominant actors in the international system.<sup>4</sup> While this may be true, the reversion to emphasis on interstate war is also the product of a strong institutional bias within the Department of Defense toward what the U.S. military does well—that is, systematically overwhelming the conventional military forces of another state. According to one prominent analyst, the Army’s, “organizational culture continues to focus nearly exclusively on state-on-state war.”<sup>5</sup> Compounding this institutional bias is the fact that American leaders are poor prognosticators when it comes to predicting where military force may be applied in the coming years. Some, such as Robert Gates and Ike Skelton, have argued that senior U.S. military or political leaders actually have a “perfect” track record in this regard—American leaders have been wrong 100 percent of the time.

A more focused assessment of the aforementioned states reveals that direct interstate war between the United States and any one of them remains highly unlikely, not simply because of America’s continuing conventional military dominance, but more importantly, because of weaknesses within each potential adversary. For example, China is beset with internal challenges that consume the attention of its leadership and the energy of its governing bodies.<sup>6</sup> These challenges are manifold. First, there are the basic internal contradictions in the Chinese system that threaten to undermine the legitimacy of central authority. That is, China is nominally communist, yet there are massive, obvious disparities of wealth between the elite few and the poor hundreds of millions. Second, corruption remains endemic.<sup>7</sup> Third, environmental degradation there is potentially unprecedented in human

history. A recent study estimated that the average life expectancy in North China had dropped by 5.5 years because of air pollution generated by coal power production.<sup>8</sup> Fourth, unrest among environmentalists, ethnic minorities, those frustrated with corruption, those frustrated with high inflation in food prices and other commodities, and others groups continues to grow. Today there are hundreds of protests per day of varying sizes – roughly four times the tally from a decade earlier. Finally, China faces increasing financial turmoil as a result of slow growth, a housing market bubble, and an opaque regulatory environment. For all of these reasons, the Chinese Communist Party is deeply concerned with control, and it is more likely to devote most energy and focus to internal stability and security.

Nearby, the most likely security challenge on the Korean peninsula involves not an attack by the North against the South, but rather a coup, regime collapse, or other form of implosion that would compel hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of refugees and/or migrants to cross the DMZ into the South.<sup>9</sup> From Washington's perspective, this would present a short-term challenge in terms of helping its South Korean ally to manage the anticipated flow of humanity, one that would probably be on par with what Europe is experiencing vis-à-vis Syrian refugees.<sup>10</sup> In the mid to long term, the challenge to Washington would likely come in the form of a major debate within a unified Korea over whether it should or could remain host to roughly 30,000 U.S. troops, given the disappearance of the DPRK threat as well as the magnetic pull of China and Beijing's strong interest in seeing U.S. forces removed from the peninsula.

Regarding Iran, the nuclear agreement signed in mid-2015 would appear to have removed the most salient aspect of any Iranian threat to vital U.S. interests. More specifically, the agreement will most likely defer indefinitely an Israeli attack on nuclear infrastructure in the Islamic Republic, which would have triggered a broader war between those two countries and which would have undoubtedly pulled in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Russia, unlike Iran, North Korea, or China, is the only entity on the planet that has the proven ability to decisively threaten American vital interests in all three of the regions most important to the United States—Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Middle East—and the only country with the ability to annihilate the United States. However, Western sanctions and low oil prices have had a significant impact on Russia—the ruble has lost half its value, economic growth has slowed dramatically, domestic production has contracted, and Russian’s hard currency reserves are dwindling quickly. More importantly, factors internal to Russia—its poor demographic outlook, its resource extraction-based economy, its inability to successfully implement military reform, and its endemic, crippling corruption—all point to a state ultimately mired in great difficulties. For these reasons, while Russia is a significant threat in the short to mid term—and arguably the *most* significant as General Dunford argued—over the long run it is a state in decline and hence unlikely to risk challenging the United States in interstate war.

In sum, major interstate war between the United States and the aforementioned states seems highly unlikely for many reasons, most of them internal to those states. The more probable threats to U.S. vital interests are those that may *involve* those adversar-

ies, but in less direct ways than major interstate war. Much more likely are conflicts involving substate or transnational actors, as well as more nebulous forms of instability, disorder, and insecurity. Nonetheless, the American defense establishment—evidenced through the most recent national-level strategies as well as major defense procurement programs such as the Ford-class of supercarriers, a new long-range strategic bomber, and a sixth generation fighter—remains focused on major interstate war.<sup>12</sup> For example, the 2015 National Military Strategy notes clearly that the first national military objective is, “to deter, deny, and defeat state adversaries.”<sup>13</sup>

One might argue that it makes sense to prepare, organize, structure, and procure materiel for the worst possible cases—that is, to prepare for major interstate war—and subsequently to assume that U.S. leaders will have the good sense to avoid “unimportant” conflicts or crises that do not affect vital interests or that the U.S. military will be able to handle conflicts or crises short of major interstate war if and when necessary. In theory, such logic may seem particularly appealing and even compelling in an extraordinarily resource-constrained environment. Reduced resources require ruthless prioritization of goals and objectives, hence it is better to focus on preparing for the potentially catastrophic rather than the more likely other types of crises or more nebulous forms of insecurity.

However, acting on this rationale leads to a significant shortcoming. If the United States chooses to engage in a conflict or crisis short of major interstate war, it will do so with a military force structured, equipped, organized, and trained to address the “wrong” type of mission. The learning curve—the time necessary for the military to adapt to adversaries, tactics, equip-



ment, locales, and formations that it was not prepared for—results in greater loss of life and treasure. An example of this was seen in Iraq, where an American military force capable of quickly demolishing Saddam Hussein’s military subsequently struggled to adapt to the requirements of counterinsurgency.

The key to overcoming this conundrum is not to simply muddle through the learning curve with its attendant high casualties and other costs, or to place all hope in the wisdom and ability of political leaders at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue to keep the United States out of messier conflicts and crises. Instead, policymakers should place greater reliance on military engagement and forward presence. Together, these tools can provide decision-makers with effective, efficient mechanisms for managing the most likely security challenges of the next decade while simultaneously mitigating the risk of a less likely but potentially more catastrophic security challenge of major interstate war from becoming a reality.

### **The Necessity of Engagement and Presence.**

Engagement and presence are “the currency that Washington uses to buy a good portion of its international influence.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, there is a broad consensus in academia that military engagement and forward presence have been essential tools for the United States to wield influence around the globe.<sup>15</sup> That consensus was also reflected by the congressionally-mandated Overseas Basing Commission (OBC), which explicitly equated overseas basing and forward presence with American influence abroad.<sup>16</sup>

It is not simply influence, though, that comes with engagement and permanent presence. More importantly, greater stability in peacetime and greater effectiveness in times of conflict, all at costs far below what would be required for any one nation to attempt alone, are what the United States can achieve in return for the costs of engagement and permanent presence. Engagement and permanent presence are not panaceas, as will be shown. This section will first address military engagement programs and then turn to address the importance of forward presence.

### *Military Engagement.*

Military engagement programs—often referred to as security cooperation—include educational exchanges, training efforts, military exercises, senior-leader visits, foreign military sales, and multinational research and development. Together, they form a critical means by which the U.S. Government encourages and enables countries and organizations to work with the United States to achieve strategic objectives.

Military engagement activities enable the United States to achieve its strategic objectives in several ways. First, there is clear evidence that Army engagement activities can enhance the ability of America's foreign partners to maintain stability and security in their own neighborhoods, thereby empowering states to deal with regional and transnational threats, including extremist networks and drug traffickers, and helping to prevent conflict before it can start.<sup>17</sup> By building partner capacity for self-defense and a sort of international neighborhood policing through military engagement programs and activities, the U.S. military can help to spread the responsibility of defending common security interests. There are many

examples of where this has been the case. For instance, the United States approved the sale of nearly two dozen Blackhawk helicopters and 3,000 high mobility multi-purpose wheeled vehicles (Humvees) to the Mexican military, which provided the Mexican government with increased capability to fight drug cartels and traffickers.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) has enabled the United States to train more than 206,000 peacekeepers since 2005. At a cost of roughly \$70-\$105 million per year, GPOI has facilitated the training, equipping, and deployment of 162,000 peacekeepers from 38 countries for 21 peacekeeping operations. Although not without critics, GPOI has nonetheless improved the ability of troops to conduct peacekeeping tasks.<sup>19</sup> More recently, American efforts to conduct aerial refueling of French fighter aircraft operating over Mali proved critical to the success of French forces. Military engagement between the U.S. and French air forces enabled operational and tactical cooperation during a time of crisis, serving both French as well as American security interests in Africa and beyond.<sup>20</sup> In the Philippines, from 2002 until 2015, the United States spent roughly \$50 million per year to support as many as 600 U.S. military personnel involved in training and equipping the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). There is evidence that this effort improved security conditions in the southern Philippines, institutionalized defense reform and professionalization in the AFP, increased investigative capabilities of the Philippine National Police, and improved quality of life and economic development in the southern Philippines.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, the \$8 billion spent by the United States on military engagement in Colombia, as part of the “Plan Colombia” initiative, is largely viewed as money well-

spent.<sup>22</sup> Colombia is not free of violence, but it is far from the near-failed narco-state that some feared it would become over a decade ago.

However, military engagement is not always successful in producing regional security or strengthening foreign security forces for internal defense and stability. The 2015 cancellation of the train-and-equip program in Syria and the 2014 collapse of Iraqi army units facing Islamic State militants north and west of Baghdad, and the resulting fall of Mosul – a major city in northern Iraq – raised serious questions about the utility of having spent roughly \$20 billion to train and equip a force that ultimately proved incapable and/or unwilling to safeguard Iraqi citizens and property.<sup>23</sup> Similar doubts have been raised with regard to American efforts in Afghanistan – especially in light of the recent fall of Kunduz, the first provincial capital captured by the Taliban since 2001.<sup>24</sup>

These and other cases of failure make it clear that military engagement for the purposes of enhancing foreign internal defense and/or regional security cannot be pursued and implemented blindly. Judging from just the cases of the Philippines, Colombia, Iraq, and Afghanistan a key independent variable is the unmistakable presence of parallel interests and policy preferences on the part of the recipient state's government and the vast majority of its citizens. Some studies dealing with security cooperation have examined larger sets of cases, concluding that the most important factors include not just parallel interests and policy preferences on the part of recipient governments and their citizens, but also the following:<sup>25</sup>

- Deep familiarity and repetitive experience in the operational environment on the part of the U.S. advisory team;

- Close coordination between the U.S. advisory team and the country team, with the U.S. embassy in the lead;
- Consistent, long-term funding by donors like the United States;
- Recipient capacity and ability to absorb and use assistance; and,
- Donor and recipient goal alignment.

When these variables are present, military engagement has a proven record of achieving success over time at reasonable cost, especially relative to a full-scale American assumption of security responsibility in a given country or region.<sup>26</sup>

The second way in which military engagement results in the achievement of strategic objectives is through deterrence and assurance. In particular, multinational military exercises form a critical means of assuring allies and friends and deterring adversaries in non-lethal ways.<sup>27</sup> Exercises instill confidence in allies by clearly signaling U.S. ability and willingness to partner in the face of security challenges. At the same time, exercises appear to have a deterrent effect, signaling to a potential adversary the ability and willingness of allies or partners to work together in response to a perceived threat.<sup>28</sup>

It has been argued that exercises may in fact worsen a security dilemma among two or more states.<sup>29</sup> This is certainly possible, but increased transparency – for example, by announcing exercises in advance, by encouraging extensive media coverage, or by inviting international observers to attend an exercise – can help to reduce the risk of a worsened security dilemma while simultaneously allowing the states participating in the exercise to achieve both their deterrence and assurance objectives.

The third way in which military engagement helps the United States achieve strategic objectives is by enhancing the capabilities of coalition partners. Both U.S. national security strategies and American history reveal that the United States prefers to wield international force in a coalition or multinational context. For example, the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review report stated, “Whenever possible, the United States will use force in an internationally sanctioned coalition with allies, international and regional organizations, and like-minded nations. . . . We have an enduring need to build future coalitions.”<sup>30</sup> The more recent 2015 National Security Strategy calls for American capabilities to be employed in the pursuit of U.S. national security “within diverse international coalitions.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, it is difficult to recall when, over the last 20 years or more, the United States has committed combat forces to any military operation unilaterally, without a single international partner.

Certainly there are a range of interoperability levels, from deconfliction in order to avoid fratricide when military forces of different countries operate in close proximity, all the way up to actual integration, when a British brigade operates under an American division for example. At the lower end of that spectrum, crafting interoperability on the fly can often be successful, but usually barely so. During the NATO operation against Libya, French and British attack helicopter units, which had never operated in such a context before and hence were incapable of conducting combined operations without great risk, agreed to fly at certain times of the day in order to avoid shooting each other. The French flew from noon to 2pm, the British flew from 3pm to 5pm, and nobody flew from 2pm to 3pm.

At the upper end of the interoperability spectrum – in the realm of high-intensity conflict or hybrid warfare – the ability of U.S. and foreign forces to operate side by side cannot be crafted from scratch, at least not without a steep learning curve and significant operational risk. Training, exercises, and common acquisition programs are critical to maintaining some minimal level of integrative interoperability with and among America’s most capable allies. Such tools expose foreign forces to U.S. tactics, techniques, and procedures that are necessary to fight side by side with American troops, while also improving U.S. capabilities by exposing American forces to the best practices of their foreign partners.

The “surge” effort in Afghanistan – where non-U.S. coalition forces made up a substantial portion of the necessary troops deployed in 2009 – proves there may be instances where the United States needs the mass provided by a broad, collective, coalition endeavor. The available evidence indicates that engagement activities better enable U.S. allies and partners to more efficiently and effectively operate in coalition environments, which remain vitally important to U.S. military endeavors.<sup>32</sup> No one can say with absolute certainty where the next military conflict will unfold and under what conditions, and it is equally impossible to discern which of America’s allies will have the political will to join in a coalition. However, if the leaders of those allies know that their national forces are capable of successfully operating side by side with U.S. forces while incurring minimal casualties, anecdotal evidence from the cases of Poland and Romania suggest that allies will be more likely to accept both the operational and political risks and therefore join the coalition.<sup>33</sup>

Fourth, military engagement improves the ability of U.S. forces to operate with international partners.<sup>34</sup> At the operational level, if coalition warfare is how the United States will prefer to fight in the future, it can only help U.S. troops to train as they would fight—that is, to provide them with exercises and training events that include multinational and coalition partners. This improves the ability of U.S. troops to operate with partners that do not necessarily speak English as their native language, to understand the practices and procedures of organizations like NATO, and to become comfortable working with and in other cultures. American troops role-playing—or paying for U.S. contractors to play the part of coalition partners—unnecessarily handicap U.S. forces when they are actually called upon to conduct an operation in a coalition context. Given the experience of the last 15 years, in which coalition partners played critical roles in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Libya, and elsewhere, the participation of multinational forces in every U.S. mission rehearsal exercise and every U.S. decisive action training event should be given higher priority in American military doctrine, defense policy guidance, and exercise planning and implementation.

Finally, military engagement that leads to increasingly capable and interoperable allies and partners results in fewer American boots on the ground, lessening the burden on the Army and Marine Corps to generate combat units for deployment rotations and thereby reducing costs in the long run. Without a draft, Washington may need to rely on capable allies to fill validated force requirements in the event of a major or longer-term conflict. Examples of military engagement leading to substantial and tangible contributions in recent operations include U.S. efforts to train and professionalize Polish, Romanian, and Geor-



gian forces. Following implementation of U.S. train and equip initiatives, each of these countries made important contributions to military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. For instance, from 2006 until 2011, a U.S. infantry company served under the command of a Romanian infantry battalion in Afghanistan's Zabul province. In preparation for those deployments, U.S. and Romanian forces routinely trained together at the Joint Multinational Training Center in Germany, providing Romania's military and political leaders with the confidence to deploy Romanian forces.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, efforts by U.S. Army forces in Europe to train Polish forces for missions in Iraq and Afghanistan proved invaluable for enabling and facilitating the deployment of Polish troops. Poland was one of only five countries to contribute ground forces to the initial invasion of Iraq.<sup>36</sup> At its height, the Polish contingent in Iraq numbered 2,400 mechanized infantry troops, and Poland commanded the multinational forces in southern Iraq that were subsequently dubbed Multi-National Division - Central-South. U.S. forces in Europe facilitated these deployments through the Stable Guardian exercise series. Meanwhile, the biannual "Bagram" exercise series between U.S. forces in Europe and Polish counterparts prepared the latter for deployments to Afghanistan. Training on the systems they would use in Afghanistan and with the allies they would be working with during the deployment provided invaluable experience, enabling the Poles to maintain deployments to Afghanistan – without caveats – through 2014. From the U.S. military's perspective, increased coalition participation should mean fewer, less frequent rotations of U.S. troops into combat zones, thereby increasing time at home station as well as spreading risk more broadly among coalition partners.

## *Forward Presence.*

Like military engagement, forward presence provides an effective and efficient means of achieving several U.S. strategic objectives. The most important of these is deterring aggression against vital interests. There is a broad-based consensus that forward presence mitigates threats and instability through deterrence (as well as assurance – more on this to follow).<sup>37</sup>

Forward-based overseas forces can deter aggression far more effectively than CONUS-based forces in both deterrence-by-punishment and deterrence-by-denial contexts. The former entails the promise of punishment so severe as to outweigh any potential gains from aggression. For example, American soldiers in South Korea accomplish this by playing the role of a “trip-wire” that would trigger a larger response. During the Cold War, U.S. forces in West Germany accomplished the same objective vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

Relying entirely or mostly on a CONUS-based force to accomplish deterrence-by-punishment is not nearly as credible for at least two reasons. First, CONUS-based U.S. forces are very unlikely to sustain casualties in any attack by an aggressor on a U.S. ally. Treaty signatures and political rhetoric are important signs of commitment, but aggressors understand that they are relatively weaker substitutes for an American military casualty when it comes to spurring the United States to respond. Second, it is reasonable to assume that U.S. adversaries are more likely to avoid aggression aimed at an American ally when there is a temporary or rotational U.S. military presence in or near that ally.

Deterrence-by-denial amounts to preventing an adversary from making any gains whatsoever. In the context of the Korean peninsula, deterrence-by-denial was more credible when American forces on the peninsula were more numerous and deployed near the demilitarized zone. In the case of Europe, even with 300,000 U.S. troops arrayed across the continent at the height of the Cold War, Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces were numerically superior. Hence it was the task of U.S. forces permanently forward-based in Europe to limit territorial losses until reinforcements arrived from the United States or until the West employed nuclear weapons.<sup>38</sup> Then and now, of the two forms of deterrence, deterrence-by-denial is far more difficult operationally, politically, and fiscally.<sup>39</sup>

Second, forward-based forces reassure allies. The presence—particularly permanent presence—of American military forces abroad is perceived by the countries in which they are based, as well as other nearby countries, as a tangible commitment of the United States to the security of its allies.<sup>40</sup> This presence and the accompanying reassurance dampens security competition in key strategic areas of the world, including the heart of Europe and northeast Asia, regions that are vital to U.S. interests.<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, forward presence enables a more effective response to security crises when and if they occur. Available evidence indicates that for small-scale contingencies requiring a battalion or less, forward-based forces in the Central Region of Europe are able to more quickly deploy than CONUS-based forces to other regions of Europe, the Caucasus, the Levant, and Southwest Asia.<sup>42</sup> The case of the deployment of four companies from the 173rd Airborne Brigade from locations in Italy and Germany to the Baltic States and

Poland in early 2014 would appear to confirm that forward presence facilitated a faster response than what was capable from CONUS.<sup>43</sup> For larger contingencies, there are limited advantages of forward presence *assuming adequate strategic airlift from CONUS exists*. However, this assumption is not valid, which places even greater significance on the role that forward presence plays in contingency response.<sup>44</sup>

Another benefit of forward presence is that it provides access to en route infrastructure and the lines of communication necessary for American security and that of its allies. The U.S. presence in Iceland during the Cold War was an example of this, promoting Washington's ability to secure and defend the North Atlantic approaches to both North America and Europe. More recently, throughout the many years of large-scale U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, access to facilities at Ramstein in Germany and Mihail Kogilniceanu Air Base in Romania played vital roles in enabling the United States and its allies to resupply forces in combat. Likewise, in the Pacific theater, U.S. Army forces in Japan provide logistical support to forces in South Korea.

Finally, forward presence also contributes directly to building and maintaining interoperability with America's most likely and most capable coalition partners, and to building and maintaining more limited but no less important capabilities among other, less capable partners.<sup>45</sup> The basing of U.S. troops in Europe since the early 1950s has provided opportunities for regular—quarterly or in some cases monthly or weekly—training, engagement, and education.<sup>46</sup> This intense, routine engagement conducted over the course of decades resulted in a high degree of interoperability among U.S. and European militaries, char-

acterized by two-way learning.<sup>47</sup> In particular, U.S. forces learned to operate effectively in coalitions with highly capable allies and to adapt to foreign environments.<sup>48</sup> From the European perspective, engagement with forward-based American military forces was – and remains – highly attractive as a means of gaining additional military capability. The case of American military presence in South Korea has had a similar effect on interoperability between the U.S. Army and the South Korean army across the range of military operations.

Over the last quarter century, the U.S. military presence in Europe has fallen from about a quarter million soldiers at the end of the Cold War to roughly 30,000 today, and numerous overseas military facilities – particularly those in Germany – have been returned to host nations. These two factors have dramatically reduced the ability of forward presence to deter and reassure, among other core functions of forward presence as discussed previously, and Washington has found itself struggling to augment its diminished permanent presence with rotational forces in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

In addition to a perceived lack of U.S. commitment to critical allies, the cut in U.S. force structure in Europe has also manifested itself in a significantly reduced command structure. For example, the U.S. corps and division headquarters previously based in Europe have all been deactivated or transferred to CONUS. Since most of the unit partnerships – critical to interoperability in the most intense military operations – between U.S. and key allies prior to the attacks of 9/11 were at the corps and division levels, a significant tool in maintaining interoperability has largely disappeared over the last two decades.

Additionally, reduced American permanent presence in Europe has left the United States scrambling to find and/or retain infrastructure it had previously thought would be unnecessary for operations and logistical support in Europe and beyond. For instance, 4 days before the United States was to turn over control of Coleman Barracks in Mannheim, Germany to German government authorities, Washington realized it needed the facility in order to store additional military equipment it had recently decided to pre-position in Europe.<sup>49</sup> Yet despite all of this, there is still the possibility that U.S. military units forward stationed in Europe may be subject to further downsizing, disbanding, or relocation to CONUS, most likely in the name of theorized cost savings and/or to justify a long-overdue base realignment and closure effort in the United States.<sup>50</sup>

### **Permanent versus Rotational Presence.**

Some analysts have argued that rotational deployment models appear to be a good substitute for permanent presence.<sup>51</sup> Advocates point to two examples to justify this perspective. First, since U.S. military forces returned the Panama Canal Zone to Panamanian sovereignty in 1999, U.S. Southern Command has relied chiefly on a rotational deployment model to conduct military engagement activities with partner militaries in Central and South America. Likewise, U.S. Africa Command – with no assigned forces of its own – has relied on rotational deployments to conduct military engagement activities across Africa since the command’s inception in 2008. Rotational models of deployment – and the occasional, temporary engagement they permit – can be useful in momentarily

contributing to deterrence and reassurance, and in building basic military capabilities, such as individual troop skills, among less-capable military forces.<sup>52</sup>

However, rotational deployments do not satisfy mid- to long-term allied requirements for deterrence and reassurance.<sup>53</sup> For example, Polish and Estonian leaders have vocally pursued the permanent stationing of allied military forces on their soil, despite the insistence of U.S. officials that this issue is not up for discussion *and* despite the fact that these countries are already hosts to rotational deployments from the United States and other allies.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, a rotationally deployed force from CONUS is unlikely to deter effectively because it is unable to prevent “opportunity motivated” aggressors—especially nuclear-armed ones—from seeking a *fait accompli* with a quick, successful military operation occurring between rotations.<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, a rotational deployment from CONUS during a period of insecurity—no matter how small or insignificant—is likely to be interpreted or characterized as escalatory.<sup>56</sup> This will have the effect of limiting the choices available to the President. Finally, rotationally deployed forces from CONUS are unlikely to arrive in theater as well-informed about local or regional culture, habits, standard operating procedures, and rules and regulations, making their learning curve somewhat steeper and inhibiting their effectiveness.<sup>57</sup>

In terms of developing capability and building interoperability, permanent forward basing appears to be more effective than rotational forward presence across the *entire* range of military operations, particularly for more intensive combat operations against hybrid or adaptive enemies.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, existing evidence appears to indicate that the development and sustain-

ment of personal and unit relationships through permanent forward basing enables smoother integration during complex combat operations against hybrid threats.<sup>59</sup>

Some argue that rotational deployments cost less than permanent forward basing.<sup>60</sup> This argument is based on the fact that rotational forces typically use host-nation training and exercise facilities, as well as host-nation life-support facilities for lodging and dining, when conducting security cooperation activities overseas. However, such arguments are misleading, shortsighted, and/or factually inaccurate. First, arguments in favor of rotational presence based on lower costs often overlook the costs of preparing a unit for an overseas training rotation. Administrative preparations plus pre-deployment training for a unit unfamiliar with NATO and Europe can add significant time and cost.<sup>61</sup>

Second, the more frequent the rotations—even without equipment such as Stryker vehicles or Humvees—the more expensive the overall effort to conduct security cooperation. This is largely due to the transportation costs involved every time a unit is sent overseas. Indeed, one former commander of U.S. Army forces in Europe has argued that, “[U.S.] forces based on the continent can conduct significantly more partnership exercises, with a significantly cheaper bill, than rotational forces.”<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, available data appears to undermine expectations of reduced costs through CONUS basing. One of the most comprehensive studies on this subject concluded that there was little difference in the fixed costs associated with basing in CONUS versus overseas, undermining the commonly held assumption that overseas bases, particularly in Europe, always cost more than CONUS bases.<sup>63</sup>



Additionally, available evidence from the last year or more of intensified rotational deployments from CONUS to Europe have revealed some unexpected findings.<sup>64</sup> First, the costs to rotate a single airborne brigade combat team (ABCT) from the United States to Europe for 6 months is roughly \$300 million, far more than some military officials expected.<sup>65</sup> This figure includes transportation, travel within theater, life support, and exercises. Just as unexpected are the costs of sustaining the prepositioned equipment in Europe that the ABCT is expected to use once it arrives there – currently, the United States is spending \$80 million per year for this sustainment, roughly double what was planned for.

In addition to potentially higher costs and limited utility for developing capability and interoperability for the most complex military operations, rotational deployment models carry other risks. For example, in times of tight budgets, troop rotations for training are among the first items to be cut, further undermining efforts to build capability, maintain interoperability, and achieve any of a number of other necessary national security objectives. This was precisely the experience of the 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment (2-8 CAV) of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division based at Ft. Hood, Texas. This unit of roughly 900 Soldiers was designated to travel to Germany and Poland in fall 2013 to participate in the NATO Response Force (NRF) exercise Steadfast Jazz. However, in early spring 2013, 2-8 CAV was notified that it was not going to be sent after all due to budgetary constraints as a result of sequestration. Instead, it was decided that only a small headquarters response cell would attend, consisting of roughly 45 personnel.

## **Conclusion.**

The most likely security challenges facing the United States and its vital interests over the coming years require more than a retreat to “Fortress America.” Messy, localized, perhaps inconclusive conflicts and other more nebulous forms of insecurity are far more likely to occupy the time and attention of the U.S. military in the next decade than major interstate war. However, the drawdown of U.S. ground forces from overseas and especially Europe, a persistent bias in the American military establishment toward preparing for major interstate war, a false assumption that DoD-led security cooperation detracts from readiness, and the perceived failures of security cooperation in places like Iraq and Afghanistan threaten to push the United States toward an excessive overreliance on precision strike stand-off capabilities and a strategy of surging American military might from the United States after a crisis has already started.

Relying on stand-off and surge capabilities cannot provide reasonable deterrence or reassurance, promote effective regional security, build the capability and interoperability necessary to succeed in combined military operations at reasonable cost, or provide senior policymakers with adequate options in managing security threats. The inability to surge quickly enough, the incorrect assumptions about reduced cost, the risks of appearing escalatory, the loss of global influence, and the failure to deter and assure are all concomitant with a strategy of surging as circumstances demand and/or relying on stand-off capabilities. Mitigating the security challenges of tomorrow necessitates investment in a more effective and more efficient set of tools.

Two such tools — forward presence and, when employed selectively, military engagement — can help to promote stability and security in contexts short of major interstate war. Moreover, engagement and presence can also contribute dramatically to operational capacity and capability across a range of military operations, including major interstate war. Unfortunately, significant cuts to overseas permanent presence and continuing pockets of institutional bias against engagement as a force multiplier and readiness enhancer have combined to limit the leverage possible through these two policy tools. Reversing these trends will require bureaucratic courage and leadership and a deeper institutional embrace of engagement as well as forward presence.

## ENDNOTES

1. The author is indebted to Con Crane, Trey Braun, Matt Dawson, Nate Freier, Bill Johnsen, Richard Lacquement, Doug Lovelace, Bill Pierce, Jim Pierce, and Don Snider for comments on an earlier draft. The views expressed in this monograph are the author's alone.

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50. Interview with U.S. Government civilian employee assigned to U.S. Army Europe headquarters in Wiesbaden, Germany, August 4, 2015.

51. *A New US Defense Strategy for a New Era: Military Superiority, Agility, and Efficiency*, Washington, DC: Stimson, November 2012, available from [stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/A\\_New\\_US\\_Defense\\_Strategy\\_for\\_a\\_New\\_Era.pdf](http://stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/A_New_US_Defense_Strategy_for_a_New_Era.pdf). On page 5, the authors argue, "The US should shift from a mind-set that emphasizes static deployments overseas, and instead rely on frequent rotations of expeditionary forces home-based in the United States to exercise jointly with allies, to familiarize themselves with potential combat theaters, and to demonstrate US resolve and capabilities."

52. For instance, the U.S. National Guard's State Partnership Program (SPP)—and the familiarization visits and traveling contact team events that comprise it—have contributed greatly to the successful development of basic military skills, to understanding the role of a military force in a democracy, and to building both partner capabilities and institutional capacity. See James N. Williams, "The National Guard State Partnership Program: Element of Smart Power," research paper published by the U.S. Army War College, March 9, 2012, available from [dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA562110](http://dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA562110); Peter Howard, "The Growing Role of States in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Case of the State Partnership Program," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 5, Iss. 2, May 2004, pp. 179–196.

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62. Mark P. Hertling, as quoted by Lance M. Bacon, "Congress pushing toward Europe base closures," *The Army Times*, January 27, 2013.

63. Michael Lostumbo et al., *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces An Assessment of Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013, pp. 196, 232.

64. Email exchange with a U.S. Army civilian employee, September 28, 2015.

65. Email exchange with a mid-ranking field grade officer assigned to Europe, October 5, 2015.

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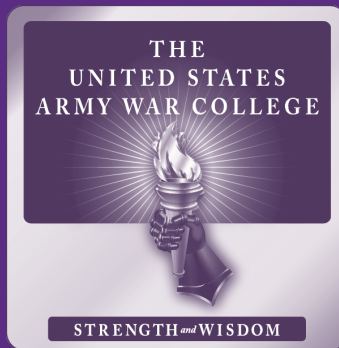
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