

## STRIKING THE BALANCE: US ARMY FORCE POSTURE IN EUROPE, 2028

J. P. Clark and C. Anthony Pfaff  
Principal Investigators

Kenneth J. Burgess, Phillip R. Cuccia, Alfred J. Fleming, Keith M. Graham,  
Jeremy S. Gustafson, Joel R. Hillison, Craig D. Morrow, John A. Mowchan,  
Douglas C. Thompson, and Aaron M. Wolfe  
Contributing Researchers

### THE CHALLENGE

In August 2018, then-Secretary of the Army Mark Esper directed the US Army War College to make recommendations regarding what US Army force posture, capabilities, footprint, and command and control structure in Europe were necessary to meet the objectives identified in the unclassified *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy* (NDS) by 2028. The study also drew on key documents such as the *Army Vision*, *Army Strategy*, *Army Modernization Strategy*, and *The US Army in Multi-Domain Operations, 2028*.

The ideal force posture needs to accomplish a range of ongoing and contingency missions and also be adaptive enough to remain viable despite any number of potential swings in resources, military balance, or the domestic politics of allies. Put differently, the challenge of developing force posture is to develop one solution that might be put to the test by a range of different possible futures. Preparing for a range of possible futures leads the team to favor adaptability and resilience along with strategic and operational effect. In an era of upheaval, the US Army cannot afford to stake its utility to the nation on a force posture that can be rendered obsolete by a single budget, new technology, or foreign election.

Within the context of Europe, the US Army must develop a force posture that best navigates the tensions between three priorities identified in

the unclassified summary of the NDS (any future reference to the NDS in this executive summary will be a reference to the unclassified summary of the NDS, referenced above): deterring or defeating armed conflict at acceptable cost, successfully competing below armed conflict, and maintaining global responsiveness and institutional flexibility through the global operating model and dynamic force employment. Any acceptable solution must fall within the bounds of all three—none can simply be disregarded as unimportant—but there is scope for hard decisions as to which elements should be emphasized over the others.

### POLITICAL AND OPERATIONAL CONTEXT: RUSSIA AND EUROPE

#### Russia

Like any country, Russia seeks security, prosperity, and influence. Russia's sense of security—or perhaps more accurately sense of insecurity—is deeply rooted in its historical exposure to outside invasion, and has been reinforced by NATO expansion and the emergence of “color revolutions” that threaten Moscow's influence in its near abroad. As a result, Russia will continue to perceive its neighbors' political and economic ties with the West

as a threat. Moreover, Moscow seeks to maintain its status as a “global player with global influence.” These two overarching interests combined necessarily entail minimizing the influence of the United States and other Western powers, especially in Russia’s near abroad, and elsewhere, like Syria, where Russia also has interests. Russia also faces a growing Islamic threat from abroad and within, which it sometimes accuses the West of exacerbating.

Based on this analysis, the following general principles will likely guide Russian behavior over the foreseeable future.

- Russia will seek to maintain “escalatory dominance” over NATO. Part of that dominance will include efforts to undermine Alliance consensus on how to respond to Russian provocations.
- Because of dwindling resources, Russia desires de-escalation and armament reduction. A decrease in oil revenues will negatively impact Moscow’s military modernization and capacity building efforts.
- Russia is unlikely to conduct further offensive conventional military attacks into neighboring states unless Kremlin leaders perceive a competitive buildup of US or international NATO forces that threatens Russian conventional defensive overmatch or the persecution of ethnic Russians in border areas.
- Russia desires removal of sanctions and greater economic inclusion with the West.
- Russia will not return Crimea to Ukraine and will continue support to separatists in Georgia and the Donetsk Basin.
- Moscow will continue influence operations below the threshold of armed conflict to destabilize NATO relationships and protect Russia’s economic interests.
- Russia will try to increase engagement with the United States and will assume the worst if faced with an unpredictable large-scale NATO buildup on its periphery.
- Future admissions to NATO for states in Russia’s near abroad will likely be met with aggression.

The evolution of Russian military capabilities through 2028 will largely depend on how the Kremlin addresses the impact of the country’s limited economy and dwindling manpower pool on military readiness. Although it has largely retained Soviet-era nuclear capabilities, which will primarily be used for

escalation management, the Russian military struggles with conducting sustained global power projection operations. But Russia’s investment and development of new military capabilities, specifically cyber and integrated combined arms operations, do provide them with a wide aperture for competing below the level of armed conflict, as well as conducting limited offensive military operations. Should Russia continue to refine its military capabilities, it will become a more dynamic adversary, capable of effectively challenging NATO and the United States at levels below armed conflict while providing scalable opportunities at levels above.

## Europe

Determining the optimal US Army force posture requires a solid contextual understanding of European partners and Allies and their anticipated future defense requirements. The US Army must consider Allies and partners’ perceived major threats and the forces and capabilities the Allies and partners will deploy to confront these threats. Unlike during the Cold War, Allies and partners do not share a common view of the threat Russia could represent. While most see Russia as a *threat*, there are varying degrees to which they view Russia as a *partner*. As a result, willingness to invest in their own defense varies considerably. Some will opt for higher-end combat platform modernization, others for enhanced border security to deal with immigration issues, while others are more concerned with social resilience programs to hedge against Russian gray-zone activities.

These options are, of course, not exclusive and any particular partner will likely pursue something in all three depending on their threat perceptions, which in turn are driven by geography. In general, however, Eastern European governments are focused on Russia as a military threat to territorial sovereignty, while Western European threat perceptions tend to focus on terrorism and Russia’s role in actively destabilizing their political and social institutions. The southern flank of Europe has been too busy dealing with waves of migrants filtering in from North Africa and the Levant to worry much about Russian threats.

The posture and capabilities of European Allies and partners will directly affect how the US Army postures forces in 2028. Trends in NATO and the EU indicate that Europe’s military strength is on the rebound after the decades of downsizing following the Cold War. Increased defense spending, interoperability, and new organizational structures driven by European threat perceptions will provide

more effective and efficient defense capabilities among US partners and Allies. Political trends and demographics are likely to be a drag on defense capability improvements but are unlikely to negate the positive trends in these capabilities. US Army leaders should plan a posture that reinforces Allied and partner capabilities and avoid the temptation to build a force structure in Europe designed to win military conflicts for them. Strategic communications plans for any national posture decisions should take into account potential international political-military impacts – in arms control and other realms.

## **BUILDING BLOCKS OF FORCE POSTURE: LEVERS**

Force posture is not just units and places but also the ability to move and the effects of activity, even if transitory. Force posture is determined by a number of related factors that function more or less as levers that can be set in combination relative to desired outcome, cost, and risks. Combined, these levers provide theater design, forces and capabilities, footprint and presence, authorities and permissions, and mission command relationships. This study considers seven different force posture levers, including

- multidomain command and control (MDC2) (field army or corps headquarters);
- long-range fires capability;
- brigade combat team location and status (forward-stationed or prepositioned stocks);
- the geographic “footprint” of training and other activities within Europe;
- investments with high implementation costs (munitions stockpiles, lines of communications improvements, dispersal, and hardening);
- investments with year-to-year costs (deployment exercises, enhanced status for prepositioned stocks, and building and maintaining regional expertise); and
- increases in high-demand units (logistics and mobility, special forces, and theater air and missile defense).

## **ORGANIZING THE LEVERS: PROPOSED STRATEGIC APPROACHES**

In a world of limitless resources, the US Army would want to select some or all of these levers. All would have some benefit. But because resources are scarce and some of these levers go together naturally, the levers must be assembled into packages of complementary options reflecting a coherent,

top-down, strategic approach. The study team initially created three strategic approaches: *privilege dynamic force employment*, *privilege global competition*, and *privilege armed conflict*. Choosing the verb *privilege* was an acknowledgment that although one element can be considered more important, an acceptable force posture would strike an appropriate balance among all three. Upon further study, the team realized that *privilege armed conflict* posed such significant challenges in implementation that less ambitious approaches should be offered. Therefore, the team essentially developed two additional strategic approaches that each offer just one of the two major elements of that option: *invest in a multidomain alliance* and *build visible presence*.

*Privilege dynamic force employment.* The NDS places an emphasis on an active but relatively thin contact layer to resource robust blunt and surge forces. This approach hinges upon the ability to project these blunt and surge forces quickly and reliably despite an adversary’s ability to contest strategic lines of communication.

*Privilege global competition.* This strategic approach offers visible reassurance to Allies, reflecting the insight that political will more than military capability is the center of gravity for NATO. This approach also accounts for continued competition below armed conflict—a far more likely scenario than armed conflict—while also providing the Army institutional maneuver space to respond in case of crises elsewhere or to adjust to changes in budget. Yet in contrast to the strict NDS approach, this approach recognizes that the meaning of dynamic force employment is quite different for large-scale, sustained ground operations than for air or naval forces.

*Privilege armed conflict.* The threat of a fait accompli attack stems not from an overwhelming Russian superiority but the unique combination of geography and force ratios in the Baltic region. This approach narrowly focuses force posture to reduce that specific area of Russian superiority. The approach most closely matches the requirements identified during MDO concept development.

*Invest in a multidomain alliance.* This strategic approach implements only the multidomain package of *privilege armed conflict* to increase the chance of successful implementation. The package consists of MDC2, long-range fires units, and munitions. This package best enables the Joint Force by setting the conditions for gaining air freedom of maneuver and Allies by creating a framework by which they can leverage some of the specific multidomain capabilities that only the United States can provide.

This package accepts the risk that sufficient maneuver combat power will not be available to deter or defeat a Russian *fait accompli*.

*Build visible presence.* This strategic approach implements only the “maneuver presence package” of *privilege armed conflict* to increase the chance of successful implementation. The package consists of three armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs) ready for instant employment and a narrow geographic focus on northeastern NATO Allies, which, for the purposes of this discussion, includes the Baltic states and Poland. As opposed to the multidomain package, which enables Joint and Allied forces, this package improves the Army’s ability to conduct large-scale ground operations. It accepts the risk that Russian anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) will be able to isolate ground forces.

## ASSESSING THE STRATEGIC APPROACHES: DECISION CRITERIA AND RISK FACTORS

To evaluate these different strategic approaches, the study team analyzed each against a range of criteria and risk factors. The study developed three categories of criteria and risk factors.

- Strategic and operational factors relate to the impact of the various strategic approaches on the ability of the Joint Force to achieve military and strategic objectives.
- Institutional factors assess the impact of the various strategic approaches on the Army across the entire force, not just in Europe.
- Environmental factors assess the sensitivity of the various strategic approaches to possible changes in the operational, strategic, and political environment.

Within these categories, the study team developed 17 criteria and risk factors intended to provide a comprehensive assessment that includes the strategic (S), operational (O), institutional (I), and environmental factors (E) of any given force posture. Eight of these criteria and risk factors were selected to influence the force posture recommendation.

- S1. The ability to defeat, and thereby credibly deter, Russian armed conflict directed against a NATO ally at acceptable cost. This achieves policy aim while avoiding Pyrrhic victory.
- S2. The ability to effectively compete below armed conflict with Russia.
- S3. The extent to which force posture provides escalation advantage and stability in a crisis by allowing decisionmakers on both sides the opportunity and time for restraint but does not

force them into making escalatory decisions early in a crisis, and avoids the 1914 syndrome.

- S4. The extent to which force posture provokes Russian political and military reactions without the ability for policymakers to adjust subsequently as necessary.
- S5. The extent to which the force posture enhances the overall political cohesion of NATO and leads to increased political will and military capabilities of individual Allies.
  - I1. The degree to which the force posture impacts Army global readiness and force generation.
  - I2. The likely response from the various components, other services, the Department of Defense (DoD), Congress, or Allies and the degree to which negative responses can prevent successful implementation.
- E1. The extent to which the force posture is vulnerable to a significant reduction in future defense budgets, forcing a future Secretary of the Army to choose between *breaking the strategy* and *breaking the army*.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The principal investigators recommend *invest in a multidomain alliance*. As the name suggests, this strategic approach enables the Joint Force and multinational partners to maximize their capabilities. It makes best use of the Army’s top modernization priority (long-range fires) in a way that alters the strategic balance of a theater to avert a potentially catastrophic, albeit low probability, scenario of armed conflict. More importantly, this strategic approach is far more stable in a crisis, as it does not place policymakers in having to rush this critical, escalatory capability into theater at a moment of high tension. As opposed to *build visible presence*, it also incentivizes allies to invest more by showing US resolve but in a manner that does not replicate capabilities that they can provide. Moreover, *invest in a multidomain alliance* has the flexibility to allow a later buildup of heavy forces if conditions still warrant.

Three alternative conditions worth noting would lead to the adoption of the other strategic approaches.

1. **If the combination of the other 1+3 threats (China, North Korea, Iran, violent extremist organizations) far outweigh that of Russia.** In this instance, *privilege global competition* provides maximum flexibility to respond to those other threats. This strategic approach competed so well because it is the closest to the current force posture, which is the product of

an array of pressures, most of which still exist. This “status quo plus” option places a higher emphasis on institutional sustainability and satisfying multiple demands.

2. **If there is a high likelihood that defense budgets will significantly decline in the next several years.** *Privilege armed conflict* was eliminated as an option because it was deemed too difficult to implement so much in a short time. But this strategic approach becomes viable if there is only a short window to achieve (or at least initiate) significant change. In that case, the Army loses nothing by trying to accomplish as much as possible. Moreover, as the option with the lowest sustaining cost, it would continue to provide the greatest strategic and operational effect over time.
3. **If there is a high likelihood of war with China.** *Invest in a multidomain alliance* is a multidomain solution that seeks to enable the remainder of the Joint Force. But there would be little air and naval capability to enable in case of a war with China. In that scenario, it would be best to have the strongest possible presence of ground maneuver forces to maintain a credible deterrent against Russian opportunism.

\*\*\*\*\*

More information about the programs of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) may be found on the Institute’s homepage at <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/>. For more publications or information about the US Army War College (USAWC) Press visit <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/>.

\*\*\*\*\*

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press executive summaries should contact the Editor for Production via e-mail at [usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ssi-editor-for-production@mail.mil](mailto:usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ssi-editor-for-production@mail.mil). All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: “Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, US Army War College.”



**This Publication**



**SSI Website**



**USAWC Press**