



American tanks from the 803rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, 3rd Armored Division, move up to the front over a narrow muddy road during an Allied offensive in the Hurtgen Forest, Germany, on 18 November 1944. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

# Reconstituting Partner Forces in Conflict

## A Global Unity of Effort

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**A**s the U.S. military and allied forces refocus their training and readiness for large-scale conflict, the concept of reconstitution has

been brought to the forefront. Reconstitution, simply put, is the regeneration of combat power following major combat operations.<sup>1</sup> It is as much an art as it is a

science. The fundamental activities of manning, training, equipping, and sustaining units to mission-capable levels have proved necessary throughout history for forces to continue fighting.<sup>2</sup> Recent conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, have revealed the importance of reconstitution. In many cases, it is more than just having enough resources for a short period to man, train, and equip military units through intense levels of combat. The challenge for the U.S. military is not only preparing its own forces for large-scale combat but also playing an active role in reconstituting partner nation forces engaged in battle.<sup>3</sup> This enormous endeavor will involve strategic cooperation to secure agreements among allies and partner nations, expand global sustainment networks, and integrate manpower and training to reconstitute combined combat power at a faster rate than the enemy.

One of the most studied cases of reconstitution in large-scale conflict is the Battle of Hürtgen Forest from the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Army's V Corps and VII Corps engaged German forces in the fall and winter of 1944 through dense woodland terrain, with several divisions losing thousands of soldiers over the course of four months. Subordinate units eventually developed a system of regenerating combat power by positioning sustainment nodes in rear echelons and rotating personnel and materiel to the front lines, while relieving troops in contact to rear echelons for recuperation.<sup>5</sup> This system of echeloned support enabled the V Corps and VII Corps to reconstitute division-level combat power and seize key terrain, thereby gaining a foothold into German territory.

The Battle of Hürtgen Forest has generated many important observations that have helped to develop U.S. Army reconstitution doctrine.<sup>6</sup> However, a closer look into the battle reveals how the U.S. military struggled greatly to sustain its land forces in contact with the German Wehrmacht, with many units barely surviving through austere winter conditions.<sup>7</sup> Commanders traded quantity over quality by rotating in fresh personnel with very little training, and even pulling troops out of other theaters to reinforce U.S. units in Europe.<sup>8</sup> Although the United States had a robust industrial base, the sustainment network still struggled to provide enough weapons, artillery ammunition, and vehicle parts to the units in combat. This strain was remedied only slightly by mutual support from logistics basing in

France and Great Britain.<sup>9</sup> Under these grueling conditions, it was almost a miracle that the U.S. Army was able to reconstitute two corps' worth of combat power in a matter of four months.

In the modern day, conditions are challenging in a much different way. The U.S. military will rarely have large-scale formations directly engaging peer adversaries; rather, partner nation militaries will already be in contact with strategic competitors such as Russia and China, and these partners arguably will not seize or retain the initiative on their own. The defense industrial base that sustained forces in World War II has all but depleted, with resources having largely thinned out since the end of the Cold War.<sup>10</sup> This has required closer cooperation by the United States with NATO and other allies and partners to build a collective network of capabilities and resources that can be used to train, advise, and assist partner nations with reconstituting their forces while in contact with the enemy and with no guarantees of interoperability.

## Partners in the Lead, Allies in Support

A deeper look at previous conflicts reveals that most reconstitution efforts involved extensive multinational cooperation, where stronger and more capable nations provided resources to smaller partner nation forces in contact with the enemy. The First World War involved extraordinary cooperation among the United States, France, Britain, and Italy to reconstitute several field armies worth of combat power.<sup>11</sup> Britain mobilized a tremendous amount of manpower and materiel to help reconstitute the French Army in the first two years of the war.<sup>12</sup> Even after the United States entered the conflict in 1917, the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) spent several months in theater

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training and equipping partner nation units to reconstitute combined combat power. In some cases, the AEF integrated several of its units with partners to form multinational task forces.<sup>13</sup> Notable examples included the integration of regiments from the U.S. 93rd Division into the French army, the organizing of the U.S. 27th and 30th Divisions under the British Second Army, and the reinforcement of the Italian army by the U.S. 332nd Infantry Regiment.<sup>14</sup>

Twenty-two years later, the Second World War once again demonstrated how multinational cooperation among the U.S. military and allies was necessary to reconstitute partner nation forces in multiple theaters of operations. The United States provided massive materiel support to Britain and the Soviet Union through the Lend-Lease program, much of which tested the limits of weapon system interoperability.<sup>15</sup> In the Pacific theater, the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps established operational basing on several island chains, enabling the Australian armed forces to send replacements to reinforce British forces in Europe, Central Asia, and North Africa.<sup>16</sup> Concurrent to these efforts were herculean initiatives by American and British forces to train and resupply indigenous Chinese, Indian, and Burmese fighters engaged against the Imperial Japanese. As part of this effort, the U.S. Northern Combat Area Command reconstituted thirty-two Chinese Expeditionary Force divisions fighting against the Japanese in Burma from 1943 to 1944. This created time and space for the British to reconstitute the multinational Fourteenth Army in India, which eventually defeated Japanese forces in Burma in 1945.<sup>17</sup>

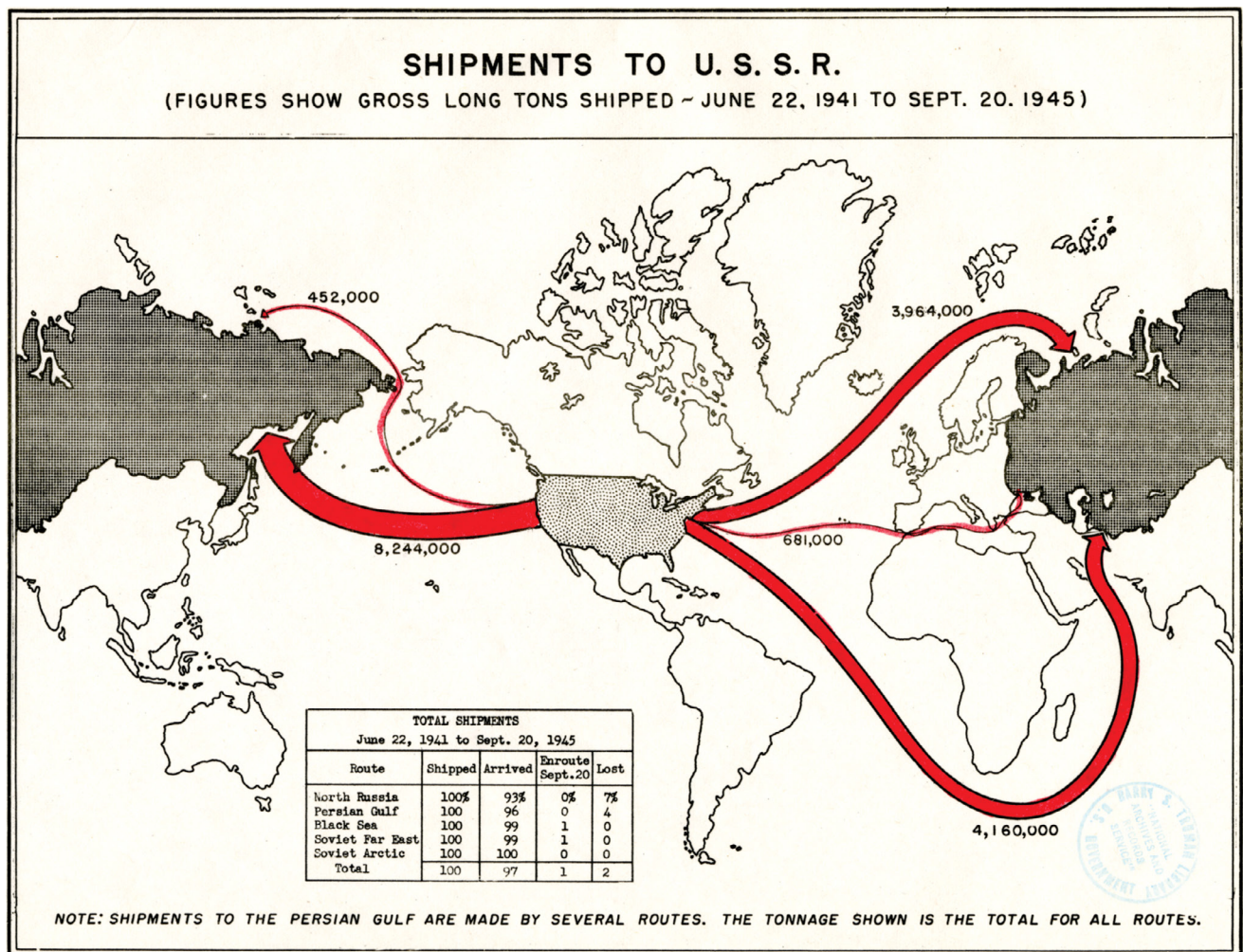
These endeavors to reconstitute partner nation forces would not have succeeded on the battlefield without the support of a few strategic activities. The first of these involved agreements by political and military leaders on the terms in which they would integrate resources to reconstitute partner forces. Following the United States' entry into the First World War, President Woodrow Wilson committed to providing resources to France, Britain, and Italy to reconstitute their militaries. However, Wilson stated that the AEF would only fight in Europe as an all-American task force independent of their partners. This approach was at odds with the positions of French and British leaders, who envisioned a strategy of reconstitution that involved amalgamating individual American soldiers into

French and British regiments.<sup>18</sup> As the AEF arrived in Europe, operational commanders in theater continued to negotiate the terms in which they would combine resources for reconstitution. Gen. John J. Pershing, the AEF commander, eventually compromised with his French and British counterparts, allowing the AEF to provide mutual support to the French, British, and Italian armies that included training and warfighting at the regimental level under a unified command.<sup>19</sup>

Similar discourse took place among political and military leaders during the Second World War involving much broader and complex negotiations. With several key allies from the previous war defeated by Axis powers, the United States and Britain sought cooperation with the Soviet Union and China, two actors who had far different interests and aims than Western allies. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill determined that despite differences in national interests, the Soviet Union and China could generate the required manpower to counterbalance Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. The United States and Britain thus agreed to provide materiel support to both countries to reconstitute requisite combat power.<sup>20</sup> Operational commanders continued to shape cooperative terms for reconstituting partner forces. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, negotiated the terms in which combined U.S. and British forces would conduct operations under a unified command.<sup>21</sup> In the Pacific theater, Lt. Gen. Joe Stilwell, the U.S. Northern Combat Area Command commander, negotiated with British and Chinese leaders regarding the scheme of training, advising, and equipping the Chinese Expeditionary Force.<sup>22</sup> These resulting compromises, bound by shared understanding and national interests, laid the framework for enduring cooperation.

With agreements in place, the U.S. military and allies engaged in a second strategic activity to enable reconstitution: expanding global sustainment networks. Since frontline partner nations had little to no means to sustain their own industrial bases, more developed allies provided the bulk of materiel support. In the First World War, the newly established United States Shipping Board produced hundreds of new ships between 1917 and 1918 to transport personnel and materiel to support European allies. Once in theater, AEF divisions played a dual role of training for combat





A World War II map details the routes by which supplies were sent from the United States to the USSR. (Map from *Report on War Aid Furnished by the United States to the U.S.S.R., June 22, 1941 - September 20, 1945* [Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 1945])

and providing labor to expand seaports in France and Britain.<sup>23</sup> These ports were essential for distributing much-needed weapons and ammunition from the United States to equip units in forward areas. The expansion of ports and influx of resources allowed France and Britain to restart some of their own domestic production of war materiel. New variants of French and British tanks, artillery cannons, and aircraft were produced and fielded to forces in contact, eventually outpacing the German army's abilities to sustain their own forces during the 1918 offensives.<sup>24</sup> The flow of supplies across global lines of communication, combined with in-theater regeneration of weapon systems, was critical to reconstituting partner forces.

In the Second World War, sustaining reconstitution operations was multidomain and multimodal.

The maritime network build during the previous war expanded even farther to sustain partner forces in Europe, North Africa, Central Asia, and the Pacific. Under the Lend-Lease Act, global sea lines of communication were used to deliver American tanks, ammunition, and other weapons to Britain, China, the Soviet Union, and other partners engaged in fighting the Axis powers. Overall sustainment via lend-lease totaled over \$35 billion and delivered over thirty thousand aircraft, twenty-six thousand tanks, and 1,400 naval vessels.<sup>25</sup> In the Asian and Pacific theaters, U.S. and Allied task forces overcame sustainment challenges through airpower and seapower. With Japanese forces controlling seaports in China and Burma, a combined British and American air task force provided aerial delivery from India to the Chinese Expeditionary Force over the

Himalayas, transporting over 650,000 tons of supplies.<sup>26</sup> Concurrently, as U.S. Navy and Marine forces gained footholds in the Pacific islands, Australia expanded its national logistics nodes to reinforce U.S. and partner forces in the region with armaments and equipment.<sup>27</sup> These efforts not only sustained reconstitution efforts but also increased pressure on enemy forces.

Although international agreements and global sustainment contributed significantly to reconstituting partner combat power, these elements required a third strategic activity to build cohesive units: integrated manpower and training. Allied distribution of war materiel was not merely a matter of reequipping partner forces; the integration of several new weapon systems into the hands of newly recruited manpower meant that partners would need to adapt their forces to fight in new ways, which therefore required extensive training of novice troops by U.S. and allied forces. Reconstitution in the First World War demonstrated interdependent relationships among U.S. forces, allies, and frontline partners. After it became clear in early 1918 that France, Britain, and Italy would have to rapidly train and equip several new units, and that the AEF would not be able to ready enough divisions on their own, Pershing agreed to integrate AEF manpower with frontline partner units to train for combat.<sup>28</sup> The AEF trained with partners at over fifty training sites in France and Britain, building competency for what Pershing called “open warfare.”<sup>29</sup> At the same time, AEF soldiers adapted to using French and British weapons and equipment, from heavy artillery cannons all the way down to rifles and bayonets. These training efforts were then tested several months later through combined operations against the Axis forces, with notable battles that included the French 157th Division at the Second Battle of the Marne and the British Second Army at the advance on Flanders.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to the First World War, the United States and allies took an economy of force approach to integrate manpower and training for reconstitution during the Second World War. With campaigns waging in four different theaters of operations, the Allies assumed high risk when it came to training newly equipped partners on Western combat systems. Under the alliance’s “Europe First” policy, the U.S. military prioritized manpower and training integration with the British through combined arms warfare, which

involved training army and air forces at several assault centers and airfields in Britain.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, the United States and Britain supported Soviet forces by shipping thousands of Western armored vehicles and munitions with very minimal training or manpower integration, as Roosevelt and Churchill accepted strategic risk based on the Soviet Union’s extensive land and manpower advantages.<sup>32</sup> The Pacific theater involved some of the most creative approaches to training and manpower integration for reconstitution. Allied task forces assembled training and logistics camps in China, India, and Burma, employing special advisor units to reconstitute the Fourteenth Army, the Chinese Expeditionary Force, and the multinational Mars Task Force.<sup>33</sup> British Field Marshal William Slim integrated soldiers from each contributing nation across the Fourteenth Army, from the headquarters down to the battalion level. The Fourteenth Army carried its combined manpower from collective unit training into combined arms operations to retake control of the Burma Road.<sup>34</sup> Cooperation went beyond training and organization; soldiers solidified connections at a human level and revived partners’ will to fight, achieving what Eisenhower termed “mutual confidence.”<sup>35</sup>

## Reconstitution in Modern Conflict

With the current war in Ukraine, the U.S. military is once again playing a lead role to reconstitute partner nation forces. The Ukrainian armed forces have been engaged in large-scale combat against the Russian armed forces for what is now approaching three years. Following their major counteroffensive operation in 2023, the Ukrainians have suffered tens of thousands of casualties against an embattled Russian force and are beginning to lose more of their territory.<sup>36</sup> Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, former chief of staff of the Ukrainian armed forces, publicly stated that Ukraine is in a state of “positional warfare,” and laid out five critical gaps in which Ukrainian forces must reconstitute to regain the initiative.<sup>37</sup> In some ways, the Ukrainians face a similar challenge as in the Hürtgen Forest: reconstituting two corps worth of combat power under austere conditions and with strained resources. While some analysts believe that Ukraine should prioritize deep fires and autonomous weapons, others believe that Ukrainian armed forces should focus on strengthening their defensive posture to attrite Russian forces while reconstituting





A stevedore sits in a Bradley Fighting Vehicle before loading it onto the *ARC Wallenius Wilhelmsen* 25 January 2023 at the Transportation Core Dock in North Charleston, South Carolina. The shipment of Bradleys was part of the U.S. military aid package to Ukraine, providing their military with additional offensive and defensive capabilities to protect their borders against Russia's illegal invasion. (Photo by Oz Suguitan, U.S. Transportation Command)

their own. What is evident is that Ukraine is running out of time and resources, and without international support they will be unable to reconstitute their forces to gain an initiative over Russia.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike the First and Second World Wars, the U.S. military has an opportunity to assist the Ukrainian armed forces in reconstitution without committing any U.S. forces in direct combat. Since the onset of the conflict, senior defense leaders have engaged in strategic dialogue with the Ukrainian general staff to advise and assist the direction of the war effort. Monthly senior-level discussions have taken place through the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, hosted by U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and attended by defense ministers and chiefs of defense from over fifty countries. These strategic discussions among allies, partners, and the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense have enabled operational planning and commitments

of defense articles from around the world. Recently, Austin stated that reconstitution is a key operational objective of the Ukrainian armed forces and U.S. European Command in 2024. In response, the Ukraine Defense Contact Group has organized capability coalition working groups centered on long-term force development initiatives that will contribute toward reconstitution.<sup>39</sup> These multinational working groups will be essential for identifying training and equipping solutions as Ukraine reconstitutes its forces while simultaneously defending against Russian attacks.

As agreements develop, operational headquarters in Europe have played critical roles in operationalizing and refining policy and strategic guidance with the Ukrainian armed forces. Since late 2022, Security Assistance Group-Ukraine (SAG-U) has been an essential military organization linking strategic aims with operations in cooperation with the Ukrainians.





Ukrainian armed forces soldiers use a 155 mm M777 howitzer, provided by Western partner states, to repel a Russian attack on 23 November 2022 in the Donetsk region of Ukraine. (Photo by Serhii Nuzhnenko, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty via [war.ukraine.ua](https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-war-artillery-155mm-m777/20221123/))

Modeled after military advisory groups of previous conflicts, SAG-U is comprised of a multinational staff and actively takes part in equipping, advising, and assisting the Ukrainian armed forces throughout their operations against Russia.<sup>40</sup> Recently, SAG-U worked with the Ukrainian general staff on planning for future operations, including long-term initiatives for reconstituting their forces. SAG-U's coordination with U.S. European Command and NATO Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe has also been crucial to incorporate interoperability standards with NATO members, as well as align support efforts to Ukraine with theater strategic objectives.<sup>41</sup> Continued cooperation at the strategic and operational levels will be necessary to solidify plans and terms for reconstitution while more broadly sustaining international diplomatic support for Ukraine.

With this, U.S. military and allied lines of sustainment have extended to great lengths to reconstitute

Ukrainian combat power. The United States continues to be the lead nation in both equipping and distribution of military capabilities to Ukraine, donating over \$44 billion worth of defense articles through presidential drawdown authority and other security force assistance programs at a scale not observed since the Second World War.<sup>42</sup> The U.S. Air Force has spearheaded strategic airlift of weapons and ammunition from the United States to Ukraine, flying hundreds of cargo missions into Europe over the past two years. Transporting these supplies has required close coordination across ports and logistics hubs in the United States and Europe, with agreements for basing and overflight being crucial to these distribution efforts.<sup>43</sup> Cooperation from NATO members has also enabled the expansion of logistics depots and facilities in Germany and Poland, providing remote maintenance and distribution services to the Ukrainian armed forces.

While the U.S. military and allied forces have responded rapidly to deliver several thousand tons of supplies to Ukraine, the defense industrial bases that support these herculean efforts have arguably not caught up to the demand for long-term sustainment at this scale. The sheer quantities of ammunition and maintenance parts required to continuously equip the Ukrainian armed forces have exposed fault lines in the U.S. military's sustainment enterprise. While smaller munitions can be sustained at a steady rate, large-caliber artillery and precision-guided munitions have been consumed at a rate that has greatly outpaced domestic production capacity. Although international partners have committed to producing new ammunition and materiel to supplement U.S. security assistance, the U.S. Department of Defense has been very hard pressed to simultaneously outfit the Ukrainian armed forces and the U.S. military, let alone keep up with Russia's defense industry.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, Russia's use of drone and AI capabilities has presented evolving threats in the operational environment, with some threats not effectively countered by conventional military equipment. This has required the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense to collaborate with allies and partners on developing hybrid capabilities, some of which are produced within Ukraine.<sup>45</sup> Sustainment on a global scale will undoubtedly require continued collaboration among the United States and allies with Ukraine, and it will likely involve a radical expansion of the international defense industry to compete against Russia.

The integration of new weapon systems from allies and partners has also involved an immense amount of training to fully reconstitute the Ukrainian armed forces into cohesive units. To put things into perspective, since 2022, Ukraine has received over ten variants of air defense platforms, four variants of main battle tanks, and hundreds of types of tracked and armored vehicles.<sup>46</sup> These new platforms placed in the hands of newly recruited Ukrainian soldiers have required U.S. military units and allied forces to train the Ukrainian armed forces from the individual level all the way up to the brigade headquarters level. The UK has made great strides in providing basic combat training for new Ukrainian soldiers at multiple bases in Europe, with individual system operator training also hosted in several countries.<sup>47</sup> Critical to these efforts has also been the U.S. Army's Joint Multinational Training

Group-Ukraine, a brigade-level task force that works hand in hand with SAG-U to train Ukrainian headquarters staffs and lead combined arms training exercises in Germany and Poland, including specific blocks of training on reconstitution.<sup>48</sup>

Despite these integrated training initiatives, the U.S. military and allies have not been able to fully resolve Ukraine's manpower issues, which are critical to reconstituting its forces. As casualties continue to mount, the Ukrainians are struggling to recruit and retain requisite manpower at satisfactory levels. The Ukrainian government has recently considered implementing changes to its conscription system to recruit nearly four hundred thousand new soldiers, a proposal that is largely unpopular among the Ukrainian population.<sup>49</sup> Although some military leaders believe that Ukraine can offset its manpower issues by investing in drones and artificial intelligence, these capabilities cannot fully replace the manpower required to conduct large-scale maneuvers and secure occupied territory.<sup>50</sup> Previous conflicts demonstrated that the integration of U.S. and allied manpower with partner units significantly contributed to fulfilling reconstitution and regaining the initiative. However, U.S. forces and other allies are constrained by national policy from accompanying the Ukrainians into combat, an action that is arguably necessary to restore a partner nation's will to fight.<sup>51</sup> This is ultimately the line drawn by civilian leaders on how far the U.S. military and its allies will go to reconstitute Ukraine's forces, and it is one that arguably does not have enough popular support from the American people to cross.

As the war in Ukraine and other conflicts persist into the future, the U.S. military will need to continue working with its allies to plan for not only building organic combat power but also reconstituting partner nation forces. Lessons learned from these conflicts will provide insight into considerations for international agreements, sustainment networks, and interoperability. To succeed, these efforts require close cooperation among the United States and allies to compromise on burden sharing, integrate new and emerging capabilities, and accept risk on training, advising, and assisting partners. The cumulative challenge will be to implement a multinational, multifaceted approach that enables partners to reconstitute forces and seize the initiative at a faster pace than the enemy. Achieving these milestones will truly take a global unity of effort. ■



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