



Polish citizens greet Battle Group Poland 26 March 2017 as the convoy of tactical vehicles crosses the border from the Czech Republic into Orzysz, Poland. The contingency of soldiers from the U.S. Army 2nd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment; the United Kingdom; and Romania integrated with the Polish 15th Mechanized Brigade, 16th Infantry Division, as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence to serve as a deterrence force. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Patricia Deal, U.S. Army Europe)

# The Role of Forward Presence in U.S. Military Strategy

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*Today's Army maintains significant forces stationed and rotating overseas that provide a visible and credible deterrent. However, should war occur, we must terminate the conflict on terms favorable to the United States. ... In the end, the deployment of the American Army is the ultimate display of American resolve to assure allies and deter enemies.*

—2016 Army Posture Statement

As the United States considers changes to its military forces and global force posture, decision makers should fully appreciate the historic role and continued relevance of the joint forces' forward presence. Since the end of World War II, the United States has maintained a global forward presence, particularly in East Asia, in the Middle East, and in Europe with our NATO allies. However, some in the United States are now questioning the strategic value of a globally engaged military, wondering if the Nation would be better off with fewer global commitments.

As discussions over our strategic posture unfold, decision makers need to keep in mind the origins of the current world order and what is required to preserve it. Overlooking or underappreciating the positive influence of forward-positioned forces, both stationed and rotational, may lead to decisions that will undermine future U.S. efforts to prevent war and ensure the stability of the international system. U.S. retrenchment risks destabilizing regional security architectures that have taken decades to build and are essential to secure U.S. national interests. A present joint force deters wars, assures allies, favorably shapes the security environment, and enables contextual and cultural understanding. Moreover, the U.S. Army component of the joint force forward presence has been, and should remain, a prominent element of U.S. national security strategy since, as will be discussed, the Army is central to each of these critical missions.

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## Deterring War

Preventing war and the human suffering it entails has long been a core element of U.S. national security strategy and military strategy. Although diplomacy and economic power have significant roles in forestalling conflict, our military is the ultimate means of deterring aggression.

To deter enemies means to prevent them from taking hostile action by persuading them that the cost of the action will outweigh the benefits. This can be accomplished through two principal approaches: deterrence by threat of punishment or deterrence by denial. Deterrence by punishment is threatening to inflict pain against aggressors if they take an action that threatens U.S. national interests. Deterrence by denial is accomplished by dissuading potential adversaries from taking actions contrary to U.S. interests by making it clear that these actions cannot succeed.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the adversary calculates that the likelihood of success is so low the probable gain is not worth the effort.<sup>2</sup> This type of deterrence is preferable under a range of circumstances, especially when deterrence by threat of punishment could be undermined by carefully limited enemy action, designed to stay below the U.S. threshold for response. An example is Russia's operations in the Ukraine, which stayed below the U.S. threshold for response. Additionally, the threat of punishment has its risks, as it might result in the expansion or escalation of conflict.

Deterrence requires capacity, communication, capability, and will.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the adversary's perception that you will use military force is central to deterrence. While we can never know exactly what conveys evidence of will, deterrence resides in the mind of the adversary. We do

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know that physical presence conveys both commitment and intentionality. U.S. security strategies since World War II also provide lessons of practice that buttress deterrence theory. We know from broad experience what does and does not work, and this knowledge can inform us how to position our forces for the deterrent outcomes we seek.

For the past seven decades, U.S. land forces have had an instrumental role in deterrence. Although air and

naval power contribute indispensable capabilities to the joint force, these forces, operating on their own, principally facilitate deterrence by punishment. Land forces in their forward presence role are often the linchpin of deterrence by denial. In addition, the forward presence of land power is the most credible signal of U.S. commitment to a nation or region. Positioning land forces in a contested area causes the enemy's calculus to be far



Exercise Noble Partner 16 begins with an opening ceremony 11 May 2016 at Vaniani Training Area, Georgia. There were displays of multinational soldiers and their equipment, airborne operations, and speeches from senior officials, including Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili. Noble Partner 16 was a critical part of Georgia's training for the light infantry company it contributed to the NATO Response Force and for enhancing Georgian territorial self-defense capability. (Photo by Sgt. Daniel Cole, U.S. Army Europe)

the U.S. threshold for inflicting punishment. It may also increase an adversary's willingness to try for a *fait accompli* before U.S. forces can be brought to bear. This is seen in the Baltic states, where there is concern that Russia will seize territory and then make the West back down by threatening an expansion of conflict. While over-the-horizon strike assets, as well as the unmatched U.S. ability to airlift forces into theater, are formidable threats, they are reactive, and they cede the initiative to the aggressor. When ground forces are present, the United States maintains the initiative as potential aggressors know the costs of aggression will be outweighed by any potential gains.

Nowhere is this more evident than on the Korean Peninsula. According to historian Allan Millett, "the withdrawal of the U.S. [Army] Fifth Regimental Combat Team from the approaches to Seoul in June–July 1949, sealed Korea's fate. This action, not careless or careful words uttered in Washington or Seoul, heartened the Communists [to attack in June 1950]."<sup>4</sup> Since the end of the Korean War, the continued forward presence of U.S. land forces has made America's retaliation against a North Korean invasion an almost expected automatic response. Many scholars believe that in the 1970s, China's Mao Tse-tung reined in North Korean leader Kim Il-sung when he threatened to repeat his quest to reunite Korea by force.<sup>5</sup>

Today, combat-ready forward-based American soldiers—armed with guns, tanks, and helicopters—communicate in no uncertain terms that the United States is committed to maintaining the sovereignty of the Republic of Korea (ROK). This forward Army presence, coupled with powerful U.S. and ROK military capabilities, deters North Korean aggression.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to the Army presence in Korea, capable forward-deployed U.S. Army units, as part of a NATO combined force, provided a strong deterrent against Soviet aggression throughout the Cold War. Although

different than if U.S. forces are offshore. The prospective adversary has no reason to question the will of the United States to respond to aggression. Quite simply, forward-deployed Army forces raise the stakes and create uncertainty among would-be aggressors that armed conflict would achieve their desired objectives.

The absence of U.S. land forces increases an adversary's temptation to act in ways that slide under

some scholars of the Cold War question whether the Soviet Union had designs on Western Europe, we do know the Soviets were opportunistic.<sup>7</sup> The forward presence of U.S. Army forces ensured that no temptation readily presented itself for Soviet opportunism.

Today, U.S. Army Europe is leveraging forward-stationed and rotational Army forces to deter aggression against its NATO allies. This is done, in part, by the Army's contribution to the European partners and allies through its "Strong Europe" approach and cooperation to make the Army forces in Europe of "30,000 Soldiers look and feel like 300,000" toward the defense of Europe.<sup>8</sup> Since Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine, many of our European partners and NATO allies have feared a militarily resurgent and aggressive Russia. "Strong Europe" seeks to both assure our allies and raise the stakes to deter further Russian aggression in the region.

## Assuring Allies

The enduring, well-developed nature of America's global network of alliances makes it easy to take these relationships for granted. These relationships must be maintained with deeds as well as words. While economic cooperation between the United States and its allies advances the fiscal interests of both sides, rotational and enduring forward Army presence addresses many security needs and tangibly assures our partners of our unwavering commitment. Many rightly regard forward presence as the cement that holds our alliances together.<sup>9</sup>

U.S. Army forward presence also helps to curb dangerous, destabilizing security competitions and prevent the emergence of security dilemmas. Presence helps to facilitate regional stability in many places around the world, to include Europe and East Asia. While the international community still faces a range of wars carried out by nonstate actors and other civil conflicts, U.S. forward presence has helped to temper competition among states in many places around the world. Over the past forty years, there has been a dramatic drop in the quantity and frequency of state-on-state conflicts, and we have seen nothing like the two cataclysmic wars that dominated the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Arguably, one of the principal causes of this trend has been the assurance that U.S. forward presence has provided to our allies.

## Stemming Regional Arms Races

The certainty that comes with a U.S. security commitment, backed by the forward presence of the Army, persuades many partners and allies not to engage in a security competition with others in the region. Competition more often than not is replaced with cooperation. After the fall of the Soviet Union, former Warsaw Pact members such as Poland and the Baltic states chose to partner with NATO, including the United States. In the Pacific, former foes such as Japan and South

Korea now cooperate with the United States to resist Chinese and North Korean threats.

Furthermore, because U.S. presence diminishes the instinctive fear of invasion or armed coercion, nations feel comfortable seeking levels of military force that are unlikely to trigger arms races (and thus regional instability). Over the past several decades, forward-deployed Army air and missile defense units, especially Patriot batteries, have provided assurance to our allies not only in the Middle East but also in East Asia and Europe.

## Mitigating Regional Security Dilemmas

U.S. forward presence also prevents the emergence of security dilemmas. These occur when a nation is faced with a decision to either grow its military or to remain vulnerable and thus risk exploitation.<sup>11</sup> For example, Germany developed the Schlieffen plan prior to World War I, fearing it would be in dire peril of losing a war if it





were compelled to fight on two fronts against the expected enemies of France in the west and Russia in the east.<sup>12</sup> The plan aimed to quickly defeat France first so Germany could then focus its efforts on defeating Russia in the east, which it believed was the more difficult adversary. The plan hinged on the rapid mobilization of the German army, for which it overtly prepared, in turn heightening nervousness on the continent.

Aware of German anxiety, the situation presented other European states with a choice: heighten their readiness for war (and risk provoking Germany) or remain weak and risk invasion. Thus, one view is that it was not interests but rather tension and insecurity that led to the onset of the “Great War.”<sup>13</sup>

Since World War II, U.S. forward presence has reduced such tension and insecurity by assuring allies in Europe and elsewhere that America would reinforce their security in the face of aggression, especially from the threat posed by the Soviet Union (and later Russia). This presence has had a calming and reassuring effect in many regions, and

Planners from the U.S. military and Japan Self-Defense Forces engage in missile defense planning 13 February 2014 during the Integrated Air and Missile Defense Wargame V in the 613th Air and Space Operations Center at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Nathan Allen, U.S. Air Force)

it has helped to stifle rivalries and head off competitions in Europe, East Asia, and other parts of the globe.<sup>14</sup>

## Geopolitical Management

Finally, assuring allies enables the United States to pursue an effective and efficient geopolitical management strategy. Alliances allow the United States to influence outcomes in important regions. What U.S. Army forces are doing in the Pacific is a good example. Through its Pacific Pathways program, the U.S. Army’s Pacific Command is implementing a new concept to assure allies in the region by developing long-term, meaningful relationships with them. By participating in joint

and combined arms exercises such as Ulchi Freedom Guardian in Korea and Yama Sakura 65 with Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force, the U.S. Army forward presence is establishing and maintaining bonds that reassure allies regarding U.S. commitments.<sup>15</sup>

Allies who regularly work and train with U.S. Army forward forces contribute to the common defense and shared interests more than they would independently. Through these engagements, developing a comprehensive understanding of each other's method of standards and principles improves interoperability between our forces.

Together, combined U.S. and allied forces who have rehearsed contingencies dissuade other powers or combinations of powers from dominating areas of U.S. interest. Without allies and partners in a given region, the United States would be forced to directly contain emerging powers in the region unilaterally, by maintaining its own large military force there, or to retreat and act according to the rules and preferences of the region's hegemon.<sup>16</sup> Both options are costly, and the latter is exceptionally dangerous.

## Shaping the Security Environment

Security environments are by their very nature complex. A multitude of factors—ranging from weak state institutions to contested territories—can provoke and sustain armed conflict in a region. Forward-positioned Army forces allow the United States to help shape security environments by reinforcing fragile states where collapse and chaos linger on the horizon, by building partner capacity to prevent revisionist states from seizing territory and by restraining allies and friends from escalating tensions. These actions, which take myriad forms, help temper the propensity for actors to seek to achieve their aims by coercion and force.

One of the most successful examples of the United States shaping a security environment by reinforcing a fragile state is that of Colombia, one of the oldest democracies in South America. For decades, the United States assisted Colombia in its struggle against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). In 2009, Colombia signed an agreement with the United States that allowed U.S. personnel to be stationed at seven military bases in Colombia.<sup>17</sup> Peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC followed some seven years later, and now Colombia enjoys much greater stability.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, Colombia is now positioned to provide reparations and assistance to the nearly six million internally displaced victims of the fifty-year struggle.<sup>19</sup>

## Building Partner Capacity

Whether forward-positioned U.S. forces are strengthening mature military forces, fixing the tactical shortcomings of indigenous militaries, or establishing completely new military forces and security institutions, they build the capabilities and capacities required to help maintain stability in a region. This is a central part of U.S. Army Africa's "African Horizons" operational approach, which leverages enduring partnerships to increase stability in both Africa and the broader region. Within this approach, Army forces enable African and European partners to create lasting solutions to conflict in Africa.<sup>20</sup> These partners often contribute to peacekeeping operations sanctioned by the United Nations or the African Union. The improved militaries of these countries also conduct operations against violent transnational extremist organizations that could otherwise exploit Africa's vast, austere spaces as sanctuaries from which to attack our homeland and interests.

The Army has had several such successes in Africa in recent years. In Uganda and Burundi, U.S. forward forces greatly assist in the fight against al-Shabaab by training forces deploying to the African Union Mission in Somalia. This enables a slow but steady improvement in the security situation in Somalia.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, U.S. partnerships with nations in the Lake Chad basin involving regionally aligned Army forces, special operations forces, and other joint forces are steadily degrading the Islamic State-allied Boko Haram and decreasing its territorial control. They are setting the theater and enabling the joint force to support the multinational effort. For example, a U.S. Army forces deployment early in 2017 to conduct base operations support integration in Cameroon is just one part of this effort against Boko Haram.<sup>22</sup> These and other accomplishments in training and engagement often go unheralded, but they are significant contributions to regional security and world order.

Although assisting allies and partners has a moral component, maintaining strong relationships has a very practical purpose. In clearly definable ways, these relationships magnify American military capabilities. When considering the recently coined 4+1 problem set (Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and radical Islam), the

U.S. relationship with its allies is neither a convenience nor merely a means to lend legitimacy to U.S. actions abroad.<sup>23</sup> Alliances strengthen U.S. military capacity and enable power projection. As international relations scholar Bernard Brodie observes, having “strong allies who were contiguous with our enemies has been an incalculable benefit to us. It has enabled us to hit our enemies hard, and to do so on their thresholds rather than ours.”<sup>24</sup>

Forward presence can also restrain our allies from taking provocative action or escalating dangerously during crisis. When North Korea struck the *Cheonan*, an ROK naval vessel, U.S. military officials proved invaluable in preventing the escalation of the crisis. The night the ship sank, Gen. Walter Sharp, then U.S. Forces Korea and Combined Forces Korea commander, immediately contacted his South Korean counterpart. Sharp not only offered his condolences over the incident and the loss of Korean life but also helped manage the crisis. In an overt move to demonstrate commitment to the region and at the same time prevent escalation, the United States offered South Korea the privilege of hosting the 2012 nuclear security summit.<sup>25</sup> This, along with the reassurance offered by U.S. presence, enabled the South Koreans to maintain their composure in what could have been the beginning of all-out war on the Korean Peninsula. None of this would have been possible without the strong relationships and trust Sharp and his predecessors had developed with their South Korean counterparts.

## Maintaining Operational Access

Forward presence provides yet another vital contribution to U.S. national security—physical access. One of the more perplexing challenges emerging in the future operating environment is the prospect of denied, or at least contested, operational access. It is clear that increasingly capable adversaries will seek to deny the United States operational access to vital regions of the world. We can expect future scenarios in which anti-access/area denial strategies will threaten the Nation’s vital interests. Forward presence enables regular contact with the senior military leaders and institutions and, in cases such as South Korea, physical presence that will prove indispensable in future crises. These relationships and physical presence help the United States shape regional security agendas that result in mutually beneficial economic and operational access around the globe. While virtual presence from air or maritime forces is often advocated in lieu

of land forces, such presence can, in some scenarios, mean the absolute absence of a permanent on-scene force.

## Enabling Contextual Understanding

Gaining an appreciation of the relevant factors that motivate behavior, fuel tensions, and influence the dynamics of a region is difficult work. The activities conducted by both rotational and forward-positioned troops are instrumental in garnering the situational awareness required to prevent and, where necessary, prepare for conflict. For example, the Army’s participation in the Sinai peacekeeping mission—the Multinational Force and Observers—not only serves to diminish tensions between Egypt and Israel but also allows the United States to better understand the values, interests, and social subtleties of these two important regional actors.<sup>26</sup> Such insights are achieved not only at the tactical level but also at the strategic level. Operating in a particular place over a long period builds insight and forms of institutional knowledge and cultural awareness that cannot be otherwise attained. Because they operate on land and interact with people, only armies can provide this level of detailed insight, knowledge, and nuanced understanding.

Experiences in recent conflicts support assertions made by Thomas Sutton and Phillip Lohaus in their article on the use of military power outside traditional wartime environments. They explain,

It is important for armed forces to establish contextual understanding well before conflicts begin. Evolving operational demands require a force that can evaluate and understand the social, cultural, physical, informational, and psychological elements influencing actors in the environment.<sup>27</sup>

For example, U.S. Army soldiers participating in NATO missions in Bosnia and Kosovo benefitted from the contextual understanding participants had gained through sustained operations in a specific location.<sup>28</sup> The same is true with soldiers stationed in other locations around the world who have attained deep understanding of the factors Sutton and Lohaus discuss. While difficult to quantify, contextual understanding gained through forward presence can be an indispensable element in protecting and promoting U.S. interests and gauging the intentions of partners. If Sharp had not had this deep understanding of the South Korean leadership, the results could have been catastrophic.

Furthermore, the contextual understanding that U.S. ground forces gain while regionally engaged with partner forces significantly contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the actual challenges of conflict in that region and what forces and capabilities would be needed to prevail. This appreciation of the relevant challenges helps ground force development in the Army and joint forces in the realities of future operating environments, rather than generic, inward-looking exercises.<sup>29</sup>

The ongoing civil war in Syria and the turmoil in the greater Middle East, along with the mass migration of refugees into Europe, are bringing home the hazards of regional instability, and many are asking how to restore stability. These are complex problems that require a deep understanding. Forward presence is a critical element required to achieve contextual understanding of such problems, which is a key to finding enduring solutions.

## Conclusion

America's strong, global forward presence since World War II has underpinned U.S. foreign policy, deterred war, and supported a stable international order. The forward presence of U.S. Army forces communicates U.S. priorities to the world, strength to our enemies, and commitment to our allies, partners, and friends. Diminished U.S. forward presence, especially of permanently stationed Army forces, will cause a shift in U.S. strategy from proactive engagement to reactive crisis response.

In the aftermath of years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, some advocate retrenchment and an end to U.S. forward presence in many parts of the globe.<sup>30</sup> This

approach has drawbacks and dangers. U.S. forward presence has facilitated a global order of deeply advantageous terms for the United States. Withdrawal risks actually increasing regional tensions in many parts of the world rather than diminishing them, which could spur arms races and spawn more frequent conflicts.

Indeed, while retrenchment may appear on the surface to be a bargain, it may prove terribly expensive over the long term. Moreover, overestimating the role of technological and virtual-presence solutions to global challenges risks America's enduring relationships and credibility with our allies, partners, and friends, and it risks encouraging our adversaries. Such a course also fails to appreciate how allies magnify the strength of U.S. military capacity and capability. As one former Army general recently argued, "A 'Fortress America' approach that brings all forces home is unhelpful . . . . Alliances and partnerships are relationships, and no relationship is sustainable if it is only long-distance, episodic, and one-sided."<sup>31</sup> Consequently, American disengagement risks creating instability that could lead to unnecessary conflict.

Since World War II, Army forward presence has been the indispensable glue that has sustained America's global network of alliances, partnerships, and friendships by signaling commitment and constancy. It has deterred wars, assured allies, favorably shaped the security environment, and enabled contextual understanding. This legacy of past success is important to understand and build upon in designing strategies for our nation's security into the future. A clear-eyed assessment will see that Army forward presence is fundamental to American success in an increasingly complex and dangerous world. ■

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## Notes

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27. Thomas Sutton and Phillip Lohaus, "Pursuing Strategic Advantage: The Utility of Armed Forces in Peace, War, and Everything in Between," research and commentary paper for *What to Do: Policy Recommendations for 2017* series, American Enterprise Institute, July 2015, 1, accessed 28 April 2017, <http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Pursuing-Strategic-Advantage.pdf>.

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29. Jacob Heim, "Ending the Targeting Drill," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 28, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2008): 183–86, accessed 28 April 2017, [http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/sais\\_review/v028/28.1heim.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/sais_review/v028/28.1heim.pdf). In this article, Heim references Frederick Kagan's *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy*, where Kagan "concludes that the success of the post-Vietnam transformation was due to an outward focus on solving actual problems posed by the geopolitical environment of the age. In contrast to this success, Kagan argues that current theories of military transformation, such as net-centric warfare (NCW), have become so inwardly focused that they don't solve any relevant problems and create a host of new ones. Kagan recommends reemphasizing the outward-focused approach used by previous successful transformations."

30. Grygiel and Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier*, 22. One of the most prominent voices advocating for minimizing U.S. forward presence is Dr. Barry Posen. Specifically, his book titled *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* calls for a strategy of off-shore balancing and one less engaged in contested regions of the world.

31. James M. Dubik, "A Closer Look at the 'Build Partner Capacity' Mission," *Army Magazine* (January 2012), accessed 28 April 2017, [http://ausar-web01.inetu.net/publications/army-magazine/archive/2012/01/Documents/FC\\_Dubik\\_0112.pdf](http://ausar-web01.inetu.net/publications/army-magazine/archive/2012/01/Documents/FC_Dubik_0112.pdf).