



Assigned to the 41st Panzergrenadier Brigade, a German Leopard 2 main battle tank scans its sector for opposing forces during Allied Spirit 24 at the Hohenfels Training Area, Joint Multinational Readiness Center, Germany, on 17 March 2024. (Photo by Sgt. Christian Aquino, U.S. Army)

Meeting Mass with Mass

Why NATO Matters to the U.S. Army

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I am quite confident that in the foreseeable future armed conflict will not take the form of huge land armies facing each other across extended battle lines, as they did in World War I and World War II or, for that matter, as they would have if NATO had faced the Warsaw Pact on the field of battle.

—Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf

The peace dividend that followed the Cold War ended on 24 February 2022, and with it died Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf’s optimistic perspective on the future. Since its inception in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has maintained peace and prosperity for its members states.¹ Much to its credit, NATO is arguably the most successful alliance in history, ending centuries of unremitting European conflicts. The expansion of NATO after the Cold War brought further peace and prosperity as NATO’s border advanced to the east. Nothing lasts forever, however; even though NATO provided a seventy-five-year peace dividend, its utility is now routinely questioned in some circles.

The question “Why should I care about NATO?” is sometimes asked by the American public, policymakers, and surprisingly even by some military professionals. This question is often coupled with frustration about NATO spending goals and various isolationist sentiments. The fact is that in the history of the world, very few wars were won by a sole national entity. Coalitions win wars. In large-scale combat operations (LSCO), the United States fights alongside allied and partner forces to win on the battlefield. Mass must be met with mass.

Prior to any future conflict, NATO must rapidly generate more maneuver brigades and increase the training and readiness of these forces. It will be too late to build and resource the required forces when war comes. The United States has a role to play in building NATO forces and improving readiness; if the United States wants to put the onus on NATO to provide the bulk of forces, then the United States must enable them to be able to fight and win. At the current rate of NATO brigade growth, resourcing, and training, it will take ten to twenty years or more to fully realize the requirements for collective defense. We do not have time to waste.

Why Must the United States and NATO Focus on Maneuver Brigades?

After watching the past three years of Russia’s war against Ukraine, we can draw many conclusions or

deductions regarding what, or if, other militaries in the world should adjust to the emerging modern battlefield. The stalemate will continue until one side can overcome the other’s use of the linked architecture of drones and electronic warfare sensors, thus enabling fires. The counter to the relative advantages of linked architecture is forthcoming, as no advantage on the battlefield remains in place forever.

Comparatively, the Western Front battlefield of World War I was deadlocked in trench warfare quickly after the war of movement subsided in 1914, when neither side could break through the adversary’s lines. The stalemate derived from neither side being able to seek a relative advantage over the other due to their equal strength and their lack of resources to converge to regain an advantage. In the intervening period of 1915–1917, neither side could gain a distinct advantage due to the consumption rate of combat units and the limitations of artillery ammunition. However, by 1918, both sides could launch significant offensives due to the ability to mass maneuver forces and the availability of ammunition to enable fires.² The war of movement returned in 1918 due to emergent military technology shaped from prosecution of the conflict mixed with the change of applied tactics and the reemergence of mass on the battlefield. The success of the American-led Meuse-Argonne offensive, which broke the Imperial German Army, is due to the American Expeditionary Forces’ ability to overwhelm the enemy with traditional mass while converging supporting resources.³

The war in Ukraine resembles this intervening period of the Great War, and many of the same challenges remain as in the period between 1915 and 1917. There are not enough maneuver brigades to seek an advantage over the enemy, and there is a limit to the resources that can

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support fires. As war evolves, this perceived stalemate can break if one side of the other can overcome the other's advantages. This could happen in one or two ways: perhaps one side can completely deny the other side's use of those systems by developing counters to them and being able to capitalize on that, or either side can no longer keep up the supply rate for drones and munitions. The war continues to grind on akin to the trenches of the Western Front in World War I, with both sides at stalemate.

Regardless of the evolution of the battlefield, what will not change is that maneuver units are required to hold and gain ground. Seizing or holding ground is not something a drone, electronic warfare, or a fire system can do. Fires or other enabling capabilities still require security to employ those capabilities. Without a maneuver unit, all the technological capabilities are rendered useless because they cannot protect themselves. There needs to be enough mass to protect the critical capabilities while at the same time provide a buffer to prevent the enemy force from employing assets against friendly forces. Simultaneously, the friendly side must generate combat power to overcome the enemy at a time and place of its choosing. Failure to do these things results in stagnation on the battlefield and

An opposing force unmanned aircraft carrying simulated droppable munitions is employed against multinational forces during Allied Spirit 25, a U.S. Army Europe and Africa-directed and 7th Army Training Command-led exercise held at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center Hohenfels, Germany. This NATO ally-and-partner-integrated training event was intended to enhance the tactical interoperability of assigned forces by focusing on procedural, technical, and human domains within a competitive combat training center environment. (Photo by Sgt. Scyrrus Corregidor, U.S. Army)

either side digging in until they can do these things. As of spring 2025, both sides in the Russo-Ukrainian War were unable to generate enough combat power to simultaneously protect critical capabilities while overcoming the other's mass. Both Russia and Ukraine require additional combat brigades. At the current rate of brigade attrition, there are only enough new brigades to replace losses and not enough combat generation to exert mass over their adversaries. If either side could generate more brigades, they could seek a relative advantage over the other. They need more maneuver brigades.

The Inflection Point

What NATO does not need is more corps or divisional headquarters. There are already enough of

these headquarters in the force structure of NATO and the allied nations. Over the past thirty years, many countries have developed headquarters capabilities instead of investing in building combat units, with headquarters being a cheaper alternative to manning, training, and equipping combat formations. Many of these headquarters are headquarters without formations to command, making them relatively of little use for practical employment. What NATO needs to do is invoke standardization and modernization of corps and divisional headquarters so that they can command the maneuver brigades. Revitalization of NATO headquarters will only make the maneuver brigades more capable and lethal. The number of corps and divisions in NATO is fit for purpose, but they must be fit to fight to enable the brigades.

Increasing the capabilities, capacities, and mass of allied land forces is daunting. NATO must immediately address problems on both the near and far-term horizons. NATO must build additional combat brigades while making accommodations to enable and train existing brigade formations. For the long term, NATO must commit to manning, equipping, and training the required combat formations and to building combat training centers (CTCs) to support brigade training—collectively a tremendous investment. In the short term, until the allies can build the requisite brigades, the United States must expand training opportunities for allied brigades and expand organizations that enable the command and control of the various NATO brigades into cohesive divisions and corps.

Traditional Mass: Still Relevant

The term “mass,” in the military sense of the word, has traditionally meant the concentration of people and weapons. Nineteenth-century military theorists proposed that commanders should apply mass at a decisive point to exploit enemy weakness. As Carl von Clausewitz would say, “Gain a *preponderance of physical forces* and *material advantages at the decisive point.*”⁴ The need for mass in modern conflict has not changed, but the interpretation extends to the massing of effects as well as forces.

The military theorist Antoine-Henri Jomini said that mass meant “to operate with the greatest mass of our forces, a combined effort, upon a decisive point.”⁵ Recent writing on multidomain operations focuses

on the convergence of *capabilities* at a given point. In a modern conflict, it is critical to mass capabilities; however, given the nature of the Russo-Ukrainian war, there is still a need to achieve traditional mass.

NATO is the alliance of choice, and nations continue to pursue NATO membership. NATO survived the Cold War and then adapted to respond to nonstate actor threats following 9/11. NATO managed to suppress Western European conflict to the point that European interstate contests are now found on athletic fields, not battlefields. However, by 2014, there were concerted efforts to have NATO enter the “end of history” era with the belief that NATO was no longer required.⁶ This resulted in an overall decrease in NATO capabilities, force structure, and size. NATO lost its mass.

By February 2022, it was clear that NATO would face its greatest challenge of the modern era: the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. NATO had faced challenges before, like the potential invasion of Western Europe through the Fulda Gap, Article 5 support to the United States after 9/11, and navigating the politics of France.⁷ Would, or more importantly, could NATO deter further aggression? In 2022, it seemed doubtful. The resolve to stand up to aggression is one thing, the capability to do so is another matter.

NATO’s deterrence capability waned after the Berlin Wall fell. Compared to 1990, when members stationed considerable forces along the Iron Curtain, NATO headquarters and respective national forces were in low readiness by 2014: short on manning, resources, funding, and not focused on preparing for LSCO. When Russia invaded Crimea, NATO began to wake up to the Russian threat, but the 2014 invasion failed to unite the alliance and drive a resurgence in readiness. Many of the allies were not yet willing to make large investments of time and money required to build readiness. It was not until 2022 and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine that dynamic changes occurred. Nations could no longer look the other way and had to face a modern existential threat on the European continent.

NATO Relevancy in a Post-February 2022 World

The Russo-Ukrainian War is now in its fourth year, and NATO is again moving toward *relevance*. None of the thirty-two member states has all the capabilities and

capacities to fight alone against Russia, and the complexity of multidomain operations further highlights that no one nation can go it alone. If NATO can converge assets from across the alliance, it has the advantage over adversaries, but the alliance still struggles with the fundamentals of interoperability and unity of effort. Russia, on the other hand, is one country and does not have to combine thirty-two efforts—it draws strength from simplicity, unity of command, and unity of effort.

When the United States based land forces in Europe before the 1990s, these forces numbered two corps, four divisions, and approximately 213,000 personnel.⁸ NATO's post-Cold War reduction of land forces also reduced capabilities and capacities. In early 2014, the U.S. presence was zero corps, zero divisions, two maneuver brigades, and approximately thirty-eight thousand personnel.⁹ By 2024, the number of U.S. forces increased to one corps forward headquarters, one division, and four maneuver brigades, totaling over one hundred thousand personnel.¹⁰ Most of those personnel are not in combat formations—they are the essential support personnel required to support an in-place combat force of fifteen to twenty thousand personnel. In the event of a short or no-notice Russian attack, very few additional divisions or brigades will be able to quickly reinforce the in-place forces. *The thirty continental allied nations must make up the delta in corps, divisions, and brigades.*

One of the most significant strategic advantages the United States has is its geography—the two large oceans on our borders. In the event of a global conflict, the oceans will play a role in homeland defense, but other conditions limit the effect that role. The interconnectedness of the global economy and the proliferation of missile technologies have substantially decreased the protection the oceans provide. This means significant friction in resupplying and reinforcement of U.S. forces overseas (figure 1). Once a conflict begins, the forces that are in place will initially provide for the common European defense, but follow-on transatlantic reinforcement may be significantly delayed, reduced, or nonexistent. This is why the combat readiness of NATO headquarters and allied forces is critical for the defense of Europe—and the American homeland.

The readiness of our allies and their modernization and transformation into forces capable of LSCO are paramount to U.S. defense strategy. We cannot rely

on transatlantic reinforcement. We cannot station all the capabilities and capacities of our nation in the European theater. Instead, we must rely on converging the critical capabilities and capacities of our allies and augmenting them with our own capabilities and forces when we can. European NATO forces should be able to rapidly mass and overcome enemy resistance to transatlantic reinforcement. But can they?

After three years of war, some pundits say that Russian armed forces are spent and that there is nothing to worry about. This is not true. Russian forces are growing and building capabilities that make them more lethal now than when they invaded Ukraine in 2022. The Russian armed forces have combat experience and leaders at each echelon that know how to fight a modern LSCO.¹¹ RAND analysts believe that in four to five years, Russian forces' numbers, level of readiness, and modernization will be greater than in January 2022.¹² The enemy is strong and getting stronger.

The NATO alliance has brought security and stability to all its members to this point, but is NATO resilient enough to deter and, if required, defeat an external threat?

Meeting Mass with Mass

Russian tactics have long relied on overcoming the enemy with mass. The tsars, the Communists, and modern Russian forces have repeatedly utilized mass as their primary principle of warfighting. An oft-attributed quote from Joseph Stalin is “Quantity is a quality all its own.”¹³ Whether Stalin said that or not, reviewing the past two hundred years of imperial Russian, Soviet, and modern Russian tactics amounts to trying to throw bodies at a problem until you overcome your enemy, or they overcome you. This is the sobering fact currently facing the Ukrainian Armed Forces.¹⁴ NATO needs mass, and mass means maneuver brigades.

The statement “meeting mass with mass” is not meant to discount the important roles of the other warfighting or joint functions. If we have learned anything from the Russo-Ukrainian conflict it is that mass is as relevant today as when Jomini and Clausewitz addressed it in their treatises. While our allies do possess modern warfighting equipment, precision munitions and other exquisite capabilities are costly and limited. Without mass, the allies would eventually run out of high-end capabilities in a war against Russia. At a



(Figure by author)

Figure 1. Threat to Transatlantic Reinforcement

certain point, mass must be met with mass. To defeat a modern threat like Russia requires converging capabilities from across the joint force and the land domain; however, in the land domain, if you do not have adequate mass to block the enemy's forces, nothing will stop your enemy from achieving its objective.

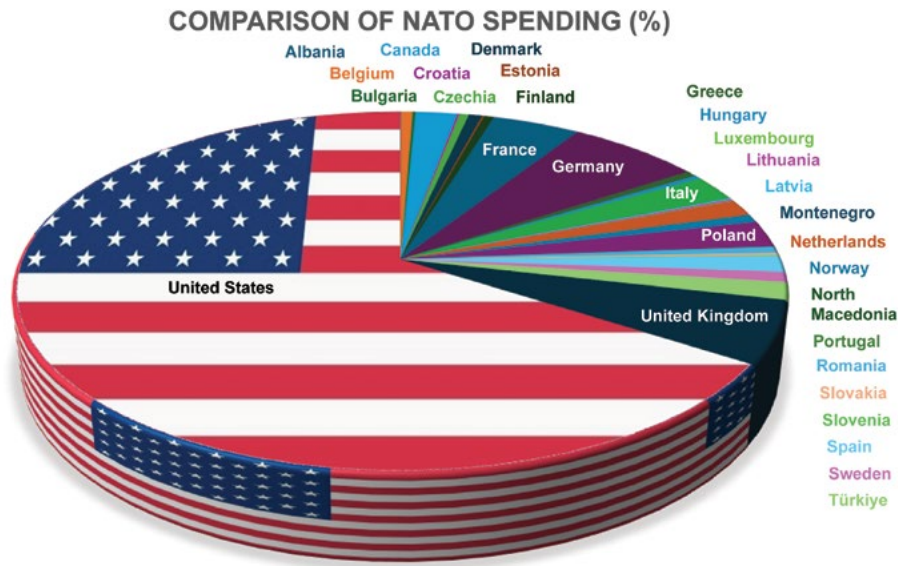
Maneuver brigades are the one land force that can block Russian land forces. Currently there are thirty-two U.S. Army active-duty brigades and six brigade-equivalent units in the Marines Corps.¹⁵ In a large-scale European conflict, the number of NATO maneuver brigades required would be triple that. The best estimate, known as the minimum capability requirement, is that over 131 allied brigades would be required to fight across the extreme length of the Russo-European border.¹⁶ Considering all global security considerations, the United States could not deploy all thirty-two active brigades to reinforce the four currently assigned or deployed to Europe.

As of 2025, NATO does not have enough maneuver brigades to meet the estimated requirement of 131 allied brigades in the regional plans.¹⁷ NATO says that an additional thirty-five to fifty brigades must be built to meet the regional plan requirements.¹⁸ Allied nations know they must build these forces, but it is a question of resources and time. At best, if member

states start now, it will take ten to twenty years to build up the NATO force pool. Every capability and capacity make a difference, no matter how big or small, but what NATO needs now is to grow maneuver brigades to increase mass.

The measure of a member state being a "good ally" is often equated to the percentage of that state's gross domestic product spent on defense, but there are other factors. Critically important is how that money is spent—what capabilities and forces are added. Could the cost of a fighter squadron (ten to twelve aircraft at a cost of \$1 billion) be better spent on land forces?¹⁹

The United States spends more on defense than all other NATO members combined (see figure 2), but these funds aren't being spent building new maneuver brigades.²⁰ Unlike many of the allies, the United States spends a tremendous amount on its sea, air, and space power. The cost of building and maintaining assets in these domains is extremely high in comparison to building and maintaining a maneuver brigade.²¹ A modern aircraft carrier costs \$13 billion to build with an annual operational budget of \$1.47 billion, but an aircraft carrier cannot seize and hold terrain.²² Land forces are required for this task, which is what drives the requirement for maneuver brigades, particularly in a conflict in Europe. The cost for an armored brigade



Reference: Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)

(Figure by author, data from NATO)

Figure 2. Comparison of NATO Spending by Nations

is approximately \$3 billion with an annual budget of \$690 million.²³

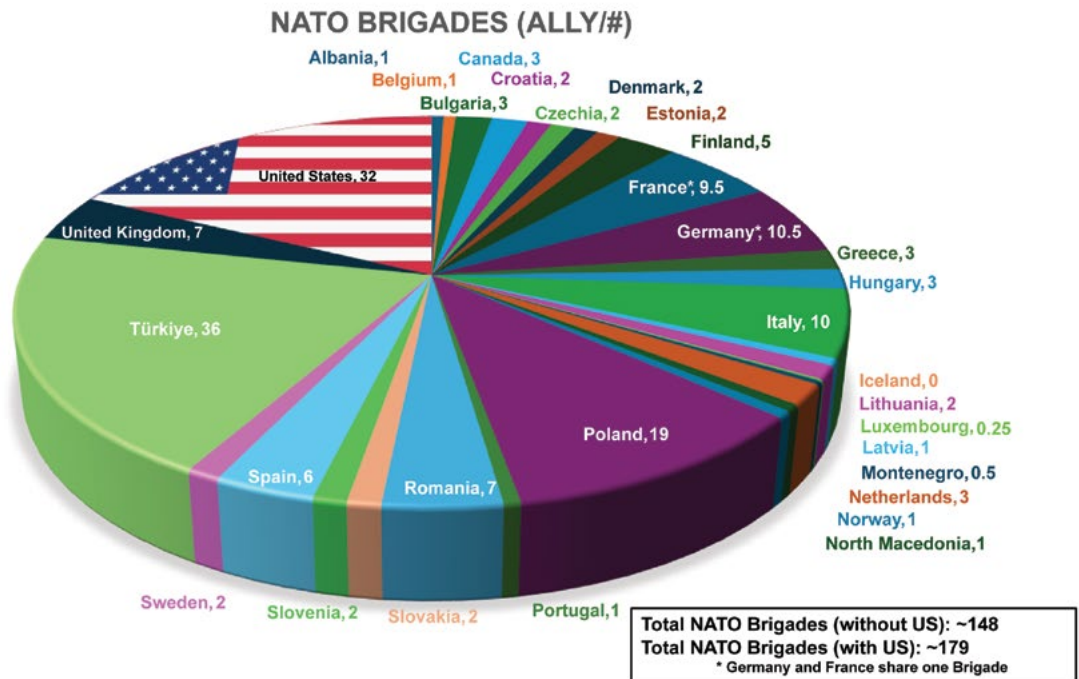
The extremely high cost of building and maintaining the Navy, Air Force, and Space Force consumes much of the U.S. defense budget. There is little left to build additional maneuver brigades in the active U.S. Army or National Guard. This leaves the United States in a dangerous position of having not enough maneuver brigades, further complicating the difficulty of a rapid transatlantic deployment of mass. Under current budget constraints, the U.S. Army cannot build more brigades, and the United States may not be able to deploy those forces in a contested environment. This means that those required shortfall brigades need to be resourced by our NATO allies (see figure 3).

Buying Time to Rebuild NATO Land Forces

For the United States to make up the shortfall of brigades alone requires doubling the size of the U.S. Army.²⁴ This growth and expansion would be on a pace and scale unseen since the 1940s and would require personnel and funds that are not available. It would come with a substantial tax burden to the

United States that could be financially ruinous. The requirements for new brigades must be equitably shared across NATO. Without allies' investing substantially in their own defense, a U.S. decision to independently resource these forces puts other requirements at risk, sacrificing transformation and modernization efforts to build less advanced but cheaper formations to man, equip, and train. The result would be disastrous to U.S. finances and a setback in developing the next generation of warfighting equipment. With our allies growing, we can meet the enemy's mass with NATO combined mass.

Defending forward by basing forces and capabilities abroad is a smart, proven U.S. strategy.²⁵ Stationing U.S. forces forward decreases the risk to the homeland and ensures that the United States maintains the ability to rapidly respond to crisis. The proliferation of long-range missiles complicates force projection from the homeland. If U.S. forces fully withdraw to within U.S. territories, the United States cedes maneuver space and advantage to adversaries. Within the NATO alliance, the United States retains not only the ability to base U.S. forces and capabilities forward but also the additional support and logistics



(Figure by author, numbers approximated from various sources)

Figure 3. Approximate Number of Active Brigades by Ally

from allies if required. The best way to defend the United States is with a well-designed forward defense alongside our allies.²⁶

One way to overcome the force ratio in Europe is for the United States to commit to permanently stationing one to two additional brigades in Europe. Additional forces stationed forward provide increased capacity to deter Russia and provide a visible commitment to our allies. The added benefit is that it reduces the risk to transatlantic reinforcement in a contested environment. The cost to station a brigade forward is approximately \$1.05 billion, while rotating a force annually costs \$1.19 billion a year.²⁷ Transatlantic reinforcement of forces in combat in Europe would cost far more in casualties and equipment than the financial cost of stationing additional forces forward now. The United States should station one to two additional brigades forward as a cost-saving deterrence measure.

It is abundantly clear that the European NATO member states must man, equip, and train the required combat maneuver brigades so that those forces are either in place or readily available. They agree that they must invest more heavily in their own defense, but they

are moving slowly in manning, training, and equipping new land forces.²⁸

The factors consistent in the allies' failure to establish new forces are political will, available funds, and the lack of volunteer recruits. These issues are outside the scope of this writing; however, continental allies should stop providing excuses and establish additional maneuver brigades. Failure to do so decreases deterrence and increases risk of conflict.

Even after the allies man and equip additional maneuver brigades, *training* those units will still be an issue. The only way to do this is by developing collective training plans that build the brigade up from the lowest tactical level, starting with the platoon.

Many of the smaller nations in NATO do not have the land or resources to train above the company echelon effectively, let alone at brigade level. For these countries, there is limited institutional knowledge on the employment of a brigade and a lack of the required practical experience to do so. Many lack modern doctrine to support it, all of which would be necessary to train combat-ready teams. NATO must build a better training framework, write supporting doctrine, and

appropriate additional resources to ensure that land forces achieve the required level of readiness.

Many allies do not have the capacity to collectively train maneuver brigades. In most cases allies (even the largest allies) only achieve company-level collective training competencies. If the United States and allies with training competency in brigade-level operations expand their capacity, the number of brigades in Europe could increase. One way nations can build this capability is for more nations to establish CTCs, which are resourced to support live brigade training against an opposing force. Establishing these training centers takes time and resources, but the payoff in increased combat capabilities in maneuver units is unmatched. As of 2024, the only fully resourced brigade training area in Europe is the Joint Multinational Training Center (JMRC) in Hohenfels, Bavaria, Germany, managed by U.S. Army Europe and Africa. If allies establish more CTC sites like this and expand training, then we would see increased combat capability in allied brigades. If three or four more sites were resourced by allies and then aligned to building combat-ready brigades, it would be easier to ensure combat readiness among the NATO maneuver brigade force pool.

JMRC only has authorities and resources to conduct one allied brigade-level training rotation per year. As it stands now, across all of Europe, only JMRC provides a venue to train a brigade in LSCO. Expansion of training opportunities is one way that the U.S. Army and NATO could increase effectiveness of allied brigades. These rotations are partially funded by the U.S. Army and partially funded by the nations participating in training. If the recently canceled Allied Spirit series expanded to a second, or even third rotation each year, it would help meet the demand for more collective training opportunities for allied brigades. This comes with increased cost in time and resources, but if the United States takes this step and other allies establish training venues for brigade-level training, it would go a long way toward increasing the readiness and capability across the alliance.

As NATO builds forces over the next five to ten years, another way the U.S. Army can further enable allied maneuver brigades is by expanding security force assistance to designated NATO brigades across Europe.²⁹ This was one of the original roles of the of

the U.S. 4th Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) employment in Europe. However, the announcement of the shuttering of the 4th SFAB puts the development of allied formations at risk.³⁰ The Army's Field Manual 3-16, *The Army in Multinational Operations*, states that SFABs have "the capacity and capability to advise, support, liaise, and assess foreign security forces and their supporting institutions in support of theater security cooperation objectives."³¹ When an advisor team is aligned to an allied brigade, it enables interoperability and increases partner performance and situational awareness through advise, support, liaise, and assess activities.³² These unique capabilities enable the land forces command to mass various allied capabilities and employ them in time and space. The loss of European-aligned SFABs with persistent presence puts this critical development of allied land forces and integration of those forces at risk.

While it may be a moot point due to the announcement of the closure of 4th SFAB, if a better-targeted, reinvigorated security force assistance effort was employed in Europe, it would enable faster development of allied formations. If the Army expands security force assistance programs in Europe, even if only for the next four or five years, the benefit for allied land force development and the alliance would be worth the cost. In competition, SFABs could deploy and assist allies in a host nation to build up and prepare for further brigade-level collective training and coach, mentor, and teach allies in maneuver warfare. In the event of conflict, having SFABs integrated with allies would increase allied interoperability with U.S. Army forces. The loss of the 4th SFAB is a loss to NATO land forces' readiness at a critical time for the United States and NATO.

Parting Thoughts

Employing traditional mass for land forces against a modernized adversary is still as relevant as it was two hundred years ago. While modernization and the convergence of capabilities are imperatives for modern warfare, nothing can substitute for traditional mass. The question of how to best align forces against Russia and put Russia at a disadvantage remains for U.S. policy in Europe. It seems unlikely the United States will station more brigades in Europe, and transatlantic reinforcement increases risk, so how do the allies

achieve mass? Policymakers must consider other ways to enable, develop, and build combat-ready allied maneuver brigades.

To address the long-term shortfall of brigades, NATO allies must

- increase the number of maneuver brigades across the alliance to meet the minimum force requirements in the regional plans, and
- develop and invest in additional brigade-level training locations (CTCs) to increase readiness of allied forces.

To mitigate the near-term shortfall, the United States should

- expand allied brigade-level collective training opportunities at JMRC, and
- expand security force assistance efforts with designated allied brigades.

The “peace dividend,” that encouraged many NATO allies to decrease their defense spending after the end of the Cold War is over. We must accept that allied combat

forces must be ready to “fight tonight” to defend every inch of NATO territory. The massive investment in resources for regional plans must come from the European NATO allies. Still, in the short term, the United States needs to provide personnel, materials, and resources to improve the combat readiness of the existing allied land formations. The cost of investing in allied readiness is insignificant compared to the price of retaking lost NATO territory. If we do not prepare for the future, we will repeat the past and pay for it in blood.

For today no nation can build its destiny alone; the age of self-sufficient nationalism is over. The age of interdependence is here.

—John F. Kennedy, 2 July 1963³³ ■

The views expressed in this article are not those of the Joint Multinational Readiness Center, 7th Army Training Command, U.S. Army Europe and Africa, the U.S. Army, the Department of Defense, or any part of the U.S. government.

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The screenshot shows the website for "Operation Serval: A Memoir of War" by Gen. Bernard Barrera. A yellow banner on the left reads "Featuring a new foreword by Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster". The page includes a "Book" section with a description of the memoir, a "Read Now" button, and an "Articles" section with an English version titled "Looking Outward: Lessons in Security Force Assistance from the French Experience in Africa" by Maj. Daniel K. Dillerbeck, U.S. Army. A QR code is visible at the bottom of the page.

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