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U.S. Army Regionally Aligned Forces: An Effective Way to Compensate for a Strategy/Resources Mismatch

by Thomas C. Westen

Those who are charged with responsibility on behalf of the public . . . should realize the unanswerable indictment that will lie against them if they shrink from incurring expense for what is vital to the nation.

Secretary of War Lindley M. Garrison, 1914¹

In the near term, U.S. forces will remain actively engaged in building partnerships and enhancing stability in key regions.

Quadrennial Defense Review 2014²

Introduction

The greatest risk to the capacity of U.S. armed forces is the reduction of landpower provided primarily by the United States Army.³ Early last year, the Department of Defense (DoD) accepted this increased risk before the operational security environment included Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the humanitarian crisis caused by an unparalleled Ebola outbreak in Western Africa. After 13 years of war, the U.S. Army now faces large DoD reductions in manpower while still continuing to provide the preponderance of forces deploying in support of the National Defense Strategy (NDS).⁴ As the backbone of the joint force, the Army provides the majority of the capacity needed by combatant commands to address enduring joint force requirements, new security risks and theater security cooperation demands while simultaneously maintaining the ability to mitigate future unknown risks that will assuredly appear in the years to come. To meet these challenges, the Army has adopted the regionally aligned forces (RAF) policy as a more effective way to meet the statutory, regulatory and combatant command requirements. However, even with the RAF policy, the Army cannot prevent an unacceptable level of risk if the strategy/resources mismatch continues to grow. There must be renewed analysis that addresses whether the Total Army (active, National Guard and Reserve) should be forced to reduce endstrength below one million Soldiers despite the increasing demand for forces.

Requirements for U.S. Army Strategic Landpower

As the nation's principal land force for deterring aggression and compelling the enemy, the U.S. Army is organized, trained and equipped to conduct prompt and sustained combat as well as a number of other strategically critical activities.⁵ As a national instrument of strategic landpower, the Army is required to meet significant expectations for achieving overarching security objectives around the world.⁶ In fact, the Army plays a significant role in 11 of the 12 listed enduring missions.⁷ Many of these missions are captured in the current force planning construct, which states that U.S. forces:

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*will be capable of simultaneously defending the homeland; conducting sustained, distributed counterterrorist operations; and in multiple regions, deterring aggression and assuring allies through forward presence and engagement. If deterrence fails at any given time, U.S. forces could defeat a regional adversary in a large-scale multi-phased campaign, and deny the objectives of—or impose unacceptable costs on—another aggressor in another region.*⁸

Contrary to Army analysis, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) translates the force planning guidance as requiring the Army to possess approximately 43 brigade combat teams (BCTs) to address simultaneous contingency plans. However, OSD does not consider the full range of BCTs and other Army forces continually deployed around the world to support combatant commanders with steady-state foundational activities in peacetime as well as to address smaller current and future contingencies.⁹ Recent Army analysis of contingency demand requirements for landpower has shown a greater increase in the need for BCTs and other Army forces than OSD originally considered; the new contingency demand is closer to 48 BCTs. Moreover, if the current instability of the operational environment demands a larger allocation of BCTs and other Army forces to maintain steady-state support to combatant commanders, the true demand could be up to 54 BCTs, potentially requiring a mobilization of the National Guard and requiring Soldiers to deploy for the duration without rotation.¹⁰

Some military practitioners argue that reductions in institutional organizations within the Army—specifically in the generating force¹¹—will allow the Army to preserve more BCTs. Unfortunately, this analysis fails to consider the fact that further reductions to the institutional Army will degrade the overall ability of the Army to perform its Title 10 responsibility to man, train and equip the force.¹² Moreover, further cuts in the generating force endanger the Army’s future reversibility—to grow rapidly if a crisis arises that requires added endstrength. The generating force is a vital part of any attempt to organize and train new units.¹³ Other analysts suggest cutting enablers (e.g., theater sustainment, medical, air defense or signal units) from the Army Total Force to create more combat power. This approach is myopic and assumes away the vital contributions enablers make to the joint force as a whole both in peacetime and during contingencies. For instance, the Army provides 60 percent of theater medical services, as well as a significant portion of theater intelligence.¹⁴ **Army enabling forces are continually in high demand by combatant commands and are critically important to all military missions.**

Army Strategic Landpower as the Backbone of the Joint Force

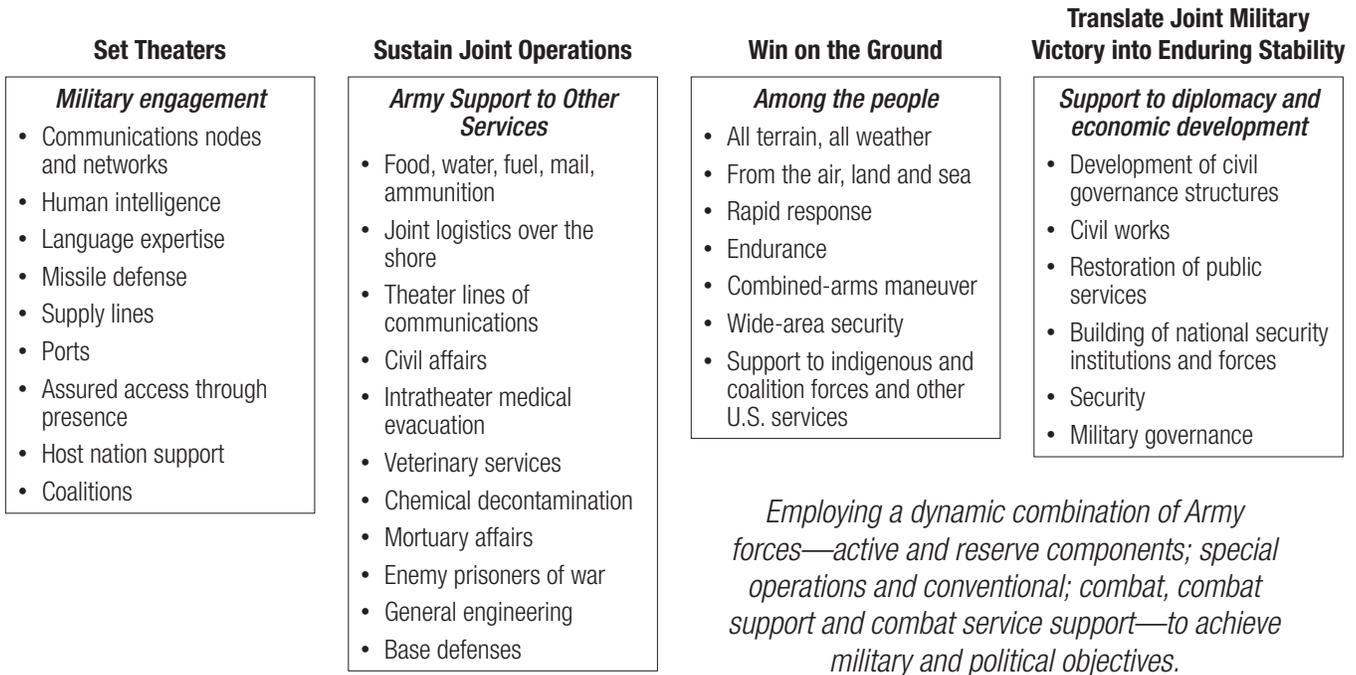
The Army, Marine Corps and special operations forces (SOF) are all components of strategic landpower; however, the Army is the principal landpower force in support of the joint force.¹⁵ The Total Army provides more than 40 percent of the foundational and sustainment capabilities needed to enable the joint force—a fact that is often overlooked. Over the past two years, much of the DoD dialogue regarding the size of the Army has seemed to focus primarily on combat power—specifically on the number of BCTs needed to conduct multiple contingency plans. However, combatant commanders have requirements for a wide assortment of Army Support to Other Services (ASOS) capabilities and enablers that allow the joint force to operate over extended periods of time and distance and to mitigate the risks of failed planning assumptions.¹⁶ For example, the Army provides common-user logistic enablers as an essential part of achieving the joint force goals of combatant commands. This critical infrastructure is constantly needed to support the rest of the armed forces across the combatant commands, regardless of the number of Army BCTs involved in a particular mission.

The Army also supports the joint force by executing the preponderance of the Executive Agent foundational activities as directed by the Secretary of Defense or the Deputy Secretary of Defense. As with ASOS, this means the Army is using its own internal manpower (sometimes reimbursed, sometimes not) to provide these capabilities to the joint force. There are 45 activities that have a global impact, including the Chemical and Biological Defense Program and Chemical Demilitarization.¹⁷

In addition to these requirements, DoD also requires Army forces to conduct military-to-military engagements and security cooperation.¹⁸ These requirements are a vital part of shaping the operational environment in support of national security goals. To meet this need and the other combatant command demands, the Army has developed the RAF policy to more effectively fulfill the total requirements for strategic landpower in a responsive manner.

U.S. Army – Backbone of the Joint Force¹⁹

Army forces provide the foundational and sustaining capabilities that enable and propel the joint force and regional coalitions/alliances.



An Army Policy with Global Impact

The RAF policy is defined as “those Army units assigned to combatant commands [and] allocated to a combatant command, and those capabilities service-retained, combatant command aligned and prepared by the Army for combatant command missions.”²⁰

Regionally aligned forces provide combatant commanders with, among other things, tailored, predictable and responsive capabilities to respond to the full range of military operations, including all contingency missions and Theater Campaign Plans (TCPs). The RAF policy incorporates the Total Army using the capabilities and organizations of the active and reserve components that are forward-stationed, operating in a combatant command area of responsibility (AOR), supporting from outside the AOR or prepared to support from outside the AOR.²¹ Regionally aligned forces include not only BCTs that conduct decisive action but also the enablers that support the joint force by conducting ASOS and Executive Agent requirements.

The Global Impact on Combatant Commands

Regionally aligned forces operate across every continent except Antarctica to conduct a wide range of operations including crisis response, mission support, security cooperation and bilateral or multilateral exercises, with division headquarters serving as the core for joint task forces. Forward-deployed regionally aligned forces are helping maintain global situational awareness, prevent conflict and promote national interests by conducting military engagement and security cooperation that is essential in an increasingly unstable security environment.²² As noted in a recent RAND study, there is a positive correlation between engagement in security cooperation and prevention of fragility in other nation states.²³ By proactively meeting combatant command requirements for regionally aligned forces, the Army can conduct sustained engagement that builds relationships and partner capacity, develops interoperability and gains access.

Key regions for RAF activities include the Asia–Pacific, Europe, the Middle East and Africa.²⁴ Each differs in scope based upon specific combatant command requirements. Yet the aggregate of all regional requirements dictates

a delicate prioritization effort. An overview of specific RAF activities differs as the combatant command requirements are naturally different in each region. The discussion that follows is not meant to be an exhaustive list of how the Total Army supports joint force commanders, but it should allow for a better understanding that the demand for Army forces is increasing. Currently, the command and control elements of more than half of the Army divisions are deployed, as are 10 BCTs.²⁵

U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM). In addition to the U.S. Army's ongoing commitment of more than 70,000 RAF troops to USPACOM, the U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) has developed an innovative new concept called Pacific Pathways for USPACOM to make use of Army regionally aligned forces. USARPAC has succeeded in linking together existing/scheduled Joint Chiefs of Staff and bilateral exercises that are part of USPACOM's TCP. USARPAC has experimentally aligned these fully-funded, long-standing exercises with an Army RAF deployment as an operation that will increase engagement opportunities with Pacific partner nations. Most important, this operation provides response options for the combatant commander and preserves and builds force readiness. Instead of incurring a potential readiness decline after a National Training Center BCT exercise, a RAF deployment to USPACOM leads to greater readiness consistent with the continuous planning of the expeditionary operations and associated sustainment requirements, as well as the synchronization of all aspects of operations along the chain of command and with the host nation forces.²⁶

Through Pacific Pathways, Army regionally aligned forces are having an impact by providing the USPACOM commander response options to address short-notice requirements. By operating in the AOR with regionally aligned forces task-organized for expeditionary operations, the Army is able to bring more capability and more options to the table than by merely participating in an exercise and then returning to home station.²⁷ The 2014 deployment of the 2d Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), 2d Infantry Division, is an example of Army RAF support to USPACOM. Deployed as an operational task force named Lancer, the SBCT executed extended partner operations—Operation Keris Strike in Malaysia and Operation Garuda Shield in Indonesia. It also provided the USPACOM commander options by being prepared to execute potential contingency operations within the region.

U.S. European Command (USEUCOM). Since the reduction of forward-deployed Army forces, USEUCOM has become more reliant on the use of rotationally-deployed regionally aligned forces in support of its TCP. As recent Russian aggression has burgeoned, the need for Army forces to assure U.S. allies has also increased. In early 2015, the Army will send an armored BCT equipment set to Europe, followed by a RAF deployment of 3,000 Soldiers from the 1st BCT of the 3d Infantry Division to act as a deterrent.²⁸ This deployment will be in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve—an exercise designed, in light of the Russian intervention in Ukraine, to reassure NATO allies and partners of U.S. dedication to maintaining enduring peace and stability in the region.²⁹ This also includes the recent exercises conducted by paratroopers from the 173d Airborne BCT, participating in multinational training with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. It also includes the deployment of United States-based troops from the 1st BCT, 1st Cavalry Division, who began training exercises with the same countries in October 2014. These land training exercises, which came at the request of the host nations, are helping to preserve regional stability, deter adversaries and support allies and partners.³⁰

In addition to that effort, Army regionally aligned forces are supporting USEUCOM's TCP by being involved in a number of other efforts with Ukraine. As part of the Army Total Force, the California National Guard is helping Ukraine achieve security cooperation objectives by helping them to build up their own national guard under the National Guard Bureau's State Partnership Program; this is an expansion of a relationship that has been ongoing for more than 20 years.³¹ In 2014, U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) was also a cohost with Ukraine for the annual Rapid Trident exercise in Lviv—an exercise devoted to promoting interoperability between NATO and numerous partner nations.

U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM). In addition to the Army's ongoing RAF commitment of more than 12,000 Soldiers to Afghanistan, the Army has maintained a sizable force throughout the Middle East in support of USCENTCOM's demand for landpower. This includes the deployment of up to 12,000 Soldiers from the Army Total Force, including National Guard units deploying as part of Operation Spartan Shield, as well as the 1st Armored Division's deployment to Jordan as a USCENTCOM forward headquarters.³²

In response to ISIS, the Army is supporting USCENTCOM with regionally aligned forces by deploying an additional 3,000 troops, operating under the 1st Infantry Division Headquarters, to Iraq to help train and assist 12 Iraqi and three Kurdish Peshmerga brigades, as well as Syrian elements.³³ The Army has also deployed 4,000 Soldiers from the 3d BCT, 4th Infantry Division to Kuwait to serve as USCENTCOM's reserve force, which could be used to battle ISIS if major combat forces are used.³⁴

The Army is also helping achieve security cooperation objectives in USCENTCOM by assigning dedicated Soldiers to serve in coordination with the Department of State as part of the Office of the United States Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority. In this capacity, U.S. Army Soldiers engage with both parties on security initiatives and work toward whole-of-government efforts to help set the conditions for a lasting two-state solution.³⁵

U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM). As part of the backbone of the joint force, the Army has sent 700 Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) headquarters in support of USAFRICOM's regional coordination of the effort to help fight the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. This group consists of command and control (C2) and medical personnel, engineers and logisticians. In addition, Army RAF units have established multiple Warfighter Information Network–Tactical systems in Liberia to assist in C2 in the effort against Ebola; there will eventually be 14 such command post nodes in support of USAFRICOM.³⁶

USAFRICOM is also continuing to use Army regionally aligned forces to achieve TCP objectives. In early 2014, U.S. Army Africa (USARAF) conducted the Central Accord Exercise—one of four regional exercises devoted to building working relationships with African nations and enhancing readiness.

Conclusion

The Army continues to bear the preponderance of global deployments and maintain its DoD position as the backbone of the joint force. The demand from the combatant commands for Army regionally aligned forces is increasing as unforeseen commitments continue to appear in an increasingly complex world. To mitigate risk, DoD needs to reassess its force structure decisions to account for these rising challenges to American security interests. New analyses should reflect the fact that there has been no interwar period or “peace dividend.” DoD should forego the continued use of unrealistic assumptions for defense planning scenarios in which Army landpower is required to meet the endstate. Failure to do so will ultimately lead to a reduced Total Army capability and increased strategic risk. These new analyses will likely show that the size of the Army Total Force should not drop below one million Soldiers, as was previously prescribed in *Quadrennial Defense Review 2006*.³⁷ They may even show that Army force structure should increase. Failure to conduct this reassessment will further exacerbate a strategy/resources mismatch as a smaller, less capable Army becomes increasingly unable to meet the growing requirements for strategic landpower. This would expose the United States to unacceptable risk in national security; potential adversaries might easily underestimate the resolve of the United States, basing their miscalculations on a perception that America no longer has the will to lead on the global stage. The U.S. Army has done its part by developing a regionally aligned forces policy to optimize all Army assets in support of enduring requirements and to meet new security risks and theater security cooperation demands. It is now time for DoD to inject realistic assumptions into defense planning that account for current and future strategic landpower requirements.

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