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Reserve Component Employment in Strategic Competition

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Introduction

America's adversaries are engaged in long-term strategic competition with the United States that is characterized by vague and ambiguous threats and complicated decisions.¹ However, our procedures for using reserve components require clear and unambiguous decisions. This would not be a problem if we needed our reserve component forces only for armed conflict, but that is not the case. The military puts into its reserve components critical capabilities for competing below the threshold of armed conflict and for preparing for conflict. These include headquarters augmentation units, homeland defense capabilities, transportation assets, critical enablers, mobilization capabilities and information and civil affairs forces. This paper argues that the United States cannot effectively employ its reserve components to compete below the threshold of armed conflict because of its inflexible processes for contingency mobilization and limited authorities for combatant commanders to use assigned reserve component forces.

To make the case, this paper looks at the challenges of today's competitive environment and how they affect reserve component usage; discusses the types of reserve component capabilities useful in this competition through the lens of the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS); and shows how current joint planning limits the options available for use of the reserve components. This paper concludes with two recommendations to better employ reserve component forces for competition below the level of armed conflict—first, planning limited mobilizations as a flexible deterrent option and, second, using allocated and assigned reserve component forces in the contact layer to expand the competition.

Strategic Competition and Access to the Reserve Components

The 2017 *National Security Strategy* and NDS identify Russia, China, Iran, North Korea and violent extremist organizations as primary competitors.² Of these, U.S. national strategy identifies China and Russia, respectively, as the most dangerous threats. The release of the Department of Defense's 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* further highlights Chinese methods to compete for regional influence below the threshold of armed conflict.³ These documents shift U.S. policy from attempting to deter competitors' malign acts to dealing with how to compete with them.

The methods these countries use for competition below the threshold of armed conflict, also referred to as operations in the "Gray Zone," are the focus of a large body of academic and professional literature. Tools available include information operations and disinformation, political and economic coercion, operations in space and cyberspace, support to proxy forces and provocation by state-controlled forces.⁴ Chinese and Russian publications provide insight into how those nations use these capabilities. The Chinese document *Unrestricted Warfare* speaks of an underlying philosophy of "unlimited measures . . . to accomplish limited objectives."⁵ Russia views these methods as fundamental to the new way of warfare and demonstrated its proficiency with them during its 2014 invasion of Ukraine and interference in the 2016 U.S. elections.⁶

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Several aspects of this type of competition complicate the utilization of reserve component forces. First and foremost is that the competition is below the threshold of armed conflict. Reserve component activation under U.S. Code, Title 10 generally requires a decision from the secretary of defense or president (depending on the authority used).⁷ Our competitors seek to present ambiguous indicators and warnings precisely to complicate those decisions.⁸ The second aspect is duration.⁹ Because this type of competition is expected to last for the foreseeable future, the United States treats it as a new aspect of the environment rather than a specific campaign. Unlike the now-routine reserve component rotations to the Middle East, which continue under 10 U.S.C. §12302 authority declared after 9/11, there is no similar authority to employ reserve components for the ongoing competition with Russia or China. Third, the competition is primarily regional. Because of this, the geographic Combatant Commands (CCMDs), especially U.S. European Command and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, are expected to conduct shaping operations primarily with their assigned forces and determine requirements for additional forces. This limits their access to reserve component forces because the services are responsible for sourcing additional forces, including assigned reserve component forces.

Reserve Component Capabilities for Strategic Competition

The NDS, the 2018 *National Military Strategy* (NMS) and the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* describe the Department of Defense’s answer to these strategic challenges. The NMS lays out five mission areas: respond to threats, deter strategic attack (and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction), deter conventional attack, assure allies and partners and compete below the level of armed conflict (with a military dimension).¹⁰ The NMS operationalizes this through the NDS’s Dynamic Force Employment concept, which categorizes forces as “contact, blunt, surge, and homeland.”¹¹ The reserve components provide capabilities to each mission set in each layer. Table 1 depicts those capabilities.

Table 1

Reserve Component Capabilities in the Dynamic Force Employment Construct

	Contact <i>Compete below the level of armed conflict</i>	Blunt <i>Delay, degrade or deny aggression</i>	Surge <i>Surge forces and manage escalation</i>	Homeland <i>Defend the U.S. homeland</i>
Respond to threats	Forward-stationed forces	Early deploying enablers, forward-stationed forces and headquarters augmentation	Reserve component combat forces and enablers	Homeland defense forces
Deter strategic attack	Reserve component strategic forces	N/A	Reserve component strategic forces	Consequence management
Deter conventional attack	Forward-stationed forces	Forward-stationed forces	Mobilization capabilities	Homeland defense forces (especially National Guard)
Assure allies and partners	Allocated and assigned reserve component forces	N/A	Reserve component support to allied forces	N/A
Compete below the level of armed conflict	Allocated and assigned reserve component forces	Forward-stationed forces and headquarters augmentation	N/A	N/A

Reserve Component Contact Forces

The Dynamic Force Employment model intends contact forces to compete below the threshold of armed conflict—either by presenting additional dilemmas to adversaries, assuring allies and partners or furthering engagement in previously disengaged areas. Two primary types of reserve component capabilities enable this—reserve forces already forward-stationed in theater and reserve forces allocated to missions in theater. There are federal reserve component forces assigned to European Command and both federal and National Guard forces in the Indo-Pacific theater, including Japan, Korea, Guam, the Northern Marianas Islands and American Samoa.¹² In addition, allocated

forces for longer-duration operations could contribute to these activities, but there are currently few allocated reserve component forces for these missions outside of the U.S. Central Command theater.

Reserve Component Blunt and Surge Forces

Although blunt and surge forces are primarily applicable after the threshold of armed conflict has been breached, demonstrating the capability to rapidly employ these forces during the early phases of a potential conflict can serve to demonstrate national will and manage escalation. The capabilities most relevant during a crisis include those provided by forces already in theater, headquarters augmentation forces and early deploying forces necessary to command and sustain operations and project power, and the mobilization base necessary to prepare for significant additional mobilization. Forces in theater, including reserve component combat and combat support units, provide additional capabilities to support deterrence and initial operations. Many operational two-star and above headquarters have reserve component augmentation detachments, including the Army's main command post operational detachments, the Air Force's integrated active wings and joint force headquarters' individual mobilization augmentee detachments.¹³ These augmentation units increase the capability and span of control of theater-level and operational headquarters. Finally, reserve component units provide the capability for considerable expansion of the reserve component mobilization base. Given that adversaries will likely attempt to disrupt mobilization and power projection,¹⁴ employing these capabilities within plan timelines requires early decision—ideally, prior to the onset of active hostilities.¹⁵

Reserve Component Homeland Forces

The NDS and NMS state that the homeland is not a sanctuary and that adversaries will target defense, government and economic infrastructure prior to and during hostilities—most likely during the initial phases of competition to disrupt U.S. decisionmaking and popular support.¹⁶ The reserve components—especially the National Guard—provide the vast majority of homeland defense forces, including task force headquarters and capabilities. In addition, some strategic homeland capabilities, such as air and missile defense and consequence management task forces, rely on reserve component task forces. Two CCMDs—U.S. Northern Command and Indo-Pacific Command—have homeland defense missions with substantially different threats and implications. In each case, the combatant commanders may need to activate some or all of their reserve component homeland forces early in a contingency plan.

Joint Planning for Mobilizing and Employing Reserve Component Forces

Joint mobilization planning focuses on expanding the force with reserve component units and sustaining the force for as long as necessary to achieve military and national security objectives. *Joint Publication 4-05: Joint Mobilization Planning* provides guidance on manpower and industrial mobilization at the national level and identifies the services as the primary planners.¹⁷ At the operational level, CCMDs determine force requirements, but the services retain the authority for sourcing those requirements, including from the CCMDs' assigned reserve component forces. CCMDs' authority over their assigned reserve component forces is limited to training and readiness oversight until those forces are ordered to active duty and validated for deployment by their parent service.¹⁸

During a crisis, combatant commanders request capabilities, and the joint staff and services source them—even assigned reserve component forces. In addition, the secretaries of the military departments—not combatant commanders—have authority over the 30-day notification rule for assigned reserve component forces.¹⁹ In practice, for the little- or no-prior warning contingencies used to develop force structure decisions, this does not matter—the force structure requirements are so large, and the timelines so short, that combatant commanders can assume all needed reserve component forces will be mobilized.²⁰ However, the practice of assuming little warning prior to hostilities delays mobilization until there is unambiguous warning of impending hostile actions and presents mobilization as an all-or-nothing decision. For competition below the threshold of armed conflict, this planning construct does not consider mobilization decisions based on ambiguous warning and limits the options available to manage escalation or expand presence in theater.

Outside of crisis mobilization, combatant commanders rely on assigned and allocated forces to present dilemmas to adversaries and expand the competitive space. The limited authority of combatant commanders to access

their assigned reserve component forces limits them to only employing those forces for a maximum of 29 days using annual training authority. Allocated reserve component forces under 10 U.S.C. § 12304b can participate in longer shaping and engagement operations in theater, but the services program funds and source units for those missions.²¹ Limiting combatant commanders' authority limits their ability to use forces that require strong relationships, such as regionally focused forces and headquarters augmentation units.

Recommendations

The two following recommendations would enhance the Department of Defense's ability to employ its reserve components for competition below the threshold of armed conflict by facilitating early decisionmaking about reserve components and increasing combatant commanders' ability to plan for the use of reserve component forces.

Recommendation 1: Use of Presidential Reserve Call-Up as a Flexible Deterrent Option

The Office of the Secretary of Defense should develop policies and processes for requesting mobilization of critical reserve component capabilities under 10 U.S.C. § 12304 as a flexible deterrent option (FDO) to provide the president additional options prior to authorizing 10 U.S.C. § 12302. Combatant commanders should plan FDOs for the early mobilization of blunt, surge and homeland layer requirements, especially forward-stationed forces, early deploying enablers, mobilization capabilities for assigned forces, required headquarters augmentation or homeland defense forces. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff should develop options for similar decisions to activate the continental U.S. mobilization base in support of combatant commander plans.

FDOs are meant to prepare for conflict, increase the force posture in the region, manage escalation and demonstrate national will—precisely the reasons for employing these specific reserve component capabilities. Many FDOs also require presidential decision—the authority necessary for 10 U.S.C. § 12304 mobilization.²²

Funding to execute these FDOs presents the same issues as for any other major FDO (such as a noncombatant evacuation): it is a significant, unprogrammed expense within the year of execution. By preplanning the options, CCMDs and services could identify the specific funding requirements and communicate how they support resolution of the threat. The services could mitigate the risks of Congress delaying supplemental appropriations to fund execution of these options by identifying and budgeting requirements to prepare and exercise forces for these operations. In times of crisis, funds appropriated to exercise the FDOs could be reprogrammed to support execution.

By preplanning FDOs for reserve mobilization and staffing them through the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Department of Defense could coordinate seven of the 11 steps required for access to reserve component forces prior to execution.²³ CCMDs, joint staff and services could coordinate requirements, sourcing solutions, waivers for notification requests, time frames and orders production, and units could train and rehearse for mobilization under conditions defined by the FDO.

Implementation of this recommendation is low risk, as it only carries with it changes to policy and procedures at the Department of Defense and joint staff levels. Even if funding to prepare for these FDOs is not fully resourced, simply having them preplanned would accelerate decisionmaking and execution in times of crisis. It would be especially appropriate for assigned reserve component forces because they already train for the designated missions. In addition, it would partially mitigate risk to mobilization timelines by starting mobilization from a warm start.²⁴

Recommendation 2: CCMD Authority to Budget and Request 10 U.S.C. § 12304b Mobilization for Assigned Reserve Component Forces

The Office of the Secretary of Defense should develop processes to allow CCMDs, through their respective component commands, to develop requests for forces and budgets for their assigned reserve component forces for mobilization under 10 U.S.C. § 12304b authority. In addition, the Office of the Secretary of Defense and joint staff should treat as operational missions shaping operations in support of global campaigns not covered by the enduring 10 U.S.C. § 12302 authority for operations against violent extremist organizations. The secretary of defense should develop and propose, and Congress should approve, a legislative change to 10 U.S.C. § 12304b expanding the authority to missions budgeted in the defense budget materials or overseas contingency operations appropriations.²⁵ This recommendation would grant CCMDs the authority to source their assigned reserve component forces for

preplanned operational missions longer than 29 days; facilitate the training, coordination and utilization of forces for those missions; and ensure that the units that perform the missions remain assigned to the theater in the future. This is especially appropriate for units with regional alignments, such as civil affairs and military information support operations capabilities, and units with specific language requirements.

Funding for these operations should be preplanned as support to CCMD operations. Ideally, these funds are programmed two to three years out, but in practice, the process is often hamstrung by emerging requirements. By designating shaping operations for global campaigns as operational missions, CCMDs could request funding for the operations and 10 U.S.C. §12304b authority using the process for overseas contingency operations requests. Though this would not completely mitigate issues with emerging requirements, it would allow CCMDs and services access to an expedited and established process for seeking funds and authority for requirements that emerge outside of the program objective memorandum time frame while still meeting the statutory requirement for preplanned operational missions.

Implementing this recommendation carries moderate risk of overuse of assigned reserve component forces. Misuse of this recommendation could lead to CCMDs attempting to source the same unit for multiple consecutive missions. The current policy that sources 10 U.S.C. §12304b requests through the global force management process provides an institutional means to identify and mitigate that risk. Without the proposed legislative change, this recommendation still would give CCMDs the authority to budget for and source their assigned reserve component forces but would not provide the additional benefit of allowing flexibility to meet emergent demands.

Conclusion

The reserve components provide important capabilities to enable competition below the threshold of armed conflict, but the joint force currently does not have flexible and timely access to them. As long as the services place critical capabilities in the contact, blunt and homeland layers of the Dynamic Force Employment model in their reserve components, assign those forces to combatant commanders and rely on the reserve components to support mobilization of surge forces (a trend that will continue in the foreseeable future), then the Department of Defense will need flexible access to those capabilities in order to compete below the threshold of armed conflict. Using limited mobilization as an FDO and expanding combatant commander access to assigned reserve component forces could expand the options available to the president for long-term strategic competition and enhance joint force readiness and lethality for large-scale combat operations.



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Notes

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