

BACKGROUND

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Meager Ground Forces, Extensive Global Challenges: A Primer for the U.S. President in 2017

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Abstract

Whoever occupies the Oval Office in 2017 will face challenges around the world, including a resurgent Russia, an increasingly assertive China, a metastasized Islamic State, and an emboldened Iran. Addressing these and other foreign policy challenges in the wake of the Obama Administration’s “leading from behind” approach will require a fundamental change of America’s role in the world. How quickly and thoroughly the next President addresses these challenges will largely determine whether U.S. foreign policy in the new Administration succeeds or fails again. A team of Heritage Foundation national security and foreign policy experts describes the state of U.S. ground forces and the challenges they face in three key strategic regions—Europe, the Asia–Pacific, and the Middle East and Afghanistan.

Whoever occupies the Oval Office in 2017 will face challenges around the world, including a resurgent Russia, an increasingly assertive China, a metastasized Islamic State (ISIS), and an emboldened Iran. Addressing these and other foreign policy challenges in the wake of the Obama Administration’s “leading from behind” approach will require a fundamental change of America’s role in the world. How quickly and thoroughly the next President addresses these challenges will largely determine whether U.S. foreign policy in the new Administration succeeds or fails.

One tool of U.S. foreign policy is the presence of military force. A key component of military force is the ground force. Acknowledging that modern military operations are conducted in a joint and combined environment, and while air and naval power are vital components of joint military operations, as is the use of allies for combined

KEY POINTS

- The U.S. Army is the United States’ primary land warfare component. The ground forces for three key regions—(1) Europe, (2) the Asia–Pacific region, and (3) the Middle East and Afghanistan—are of particular concern because of their importance to vital U.S. security interests.
- The presence of U.S. ground forces in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East deters America’s adversaries, strengthens allies, and protects U.S. interests. The next President must be aware that, as a first priority, the U.S. must have adequate ground forces to respond to and have a presence in all three key strategic areas.
- Whoever occupies the Oval office in 2017 will face challenges around the world, including a resurgent Russia, an increasingly assertive China, a metastasized Islamic State, and an emboldened Iran.
- How quickly and thoroughly the next President addresses these challenges will largely determine whether U.S. foreign policy succeeds—or fails again.

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operations, this *Backgrounder* focuses solely on the challenges for U.S. ground forces.

The ground forces for three key regions—(1) Europe, (2) the Asia–Pacific region, and (3) the Middle East and Afghanistan—are of particular concern because of their importance to vital U.S. security interests. This does not mean that Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa are unimportant; rather, it is an acknowledgement that the security challenges within these regions do not currently rise to the level of direct threats to America’s vital security interests as defined in the *2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength*.¹ And, as a first priority, the U.S. must have adequate forces to respond to and have a presence in all three key strategic areas.

Planned reductions in U.S. ground forces will significantly put U.S. interests at risk. The next President will enter office without sufficient, capable, responsive ground forces.

The State of U.S. Ground Forces

The U.S. Army is the United States’ primary land warfare component. Although it addresses all types of operations across the range of ground force employment, its chief value to the nation is its ability to defeat and destroy enemy land forces in battle.

As is the case with all of the services, the U.S. Army has sought ways to absorb the budget cuts driven by the Budget Control Act of 2011 in a responsible manner while still meeting the missions outlined in the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG).² Fis-

cal challenges have strained the Army’s ability to meet the national security requirements outlined in the DSG even as it has worked to find a proper balance between readiness, modernization, and end strength.³ The Army has continued to reduce its end strength and accept greater risk to its modernization programs to preserve readiness levels, an even more challenging problem given that its budget in fiscal year (FY) 2015 was \$4 billion lower than in FY 2014.

From a height of 566,000 troops in FY 2011, the Army’s end strength has shrunk to 490,000 active duty soldiers in FY 2015.⁴ The ongoing debate between the White House and Congress (and within Congress) over funding levels as constrained by the Budget Control Act will determine whether the Army is able to sustain a projected end strength of 450,000—the minimum force level required to execute the DSG⁵—or must reduce further to 420,000 soldiers. In July 2015, the Army announced it would speed up its troop-reduction timeline, shedding 40,000 soldiers by the end of FY 2018 to arrive at the 450,000 minimum outlined in the DSG.⁶ (Since these cuts are not in effect in FY 2015, they do not factor into the Army scoring for the 2016 *Index*.)

Operationally, the Army has 140,130 soldiers stationed in 150 countries.⁷ This is a slight decline from the previous year’s 150,090 soldiers.⁸ Of these 140,130 soldiers, approximately 45,000 are actively engaged in named operations, with the Army maintaining fewer than 8,000 soldiers in Afghanistan, a dramatic decline from the 32,000 stationed there in 2014.⁹

1. Dakota L. Wood, ed., *2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2015), <http://index.heritage.org/militarystrength/chapter/op-environment/asia/>.
2. The Honorable John M. McHugh and General Raymond T. Odierno, “On the Posture of the United States Army,” statement before the Subcommittee on Defense, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate, 114th Cong., 1st Sess., March 11, 2015, p. ii, http://usarmy.vo.llnwd.net/e2/rv5_downloads/aps/aps_2015.pdf (accessed August 26, 2015).
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
6. Michelle Tan, “Army Lays Out Plan to Cut 40,000 Soldiers,” *Army Times*, July 10, 2015, <http://www.armytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2015/07/09/army-outlines-40000-cuts/29923339/> (accessed July 14, 2015).
7. U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, *United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request: Overview*, February 2015, p. 8-1, http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2016/FY2016_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf (accessed March 17, 2015).
8. The Honorable John M. McHugh and General Raymond T. Odierno, “On the Posture of the United States Army,” testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representative, 113th Cong., 2nd Sess., March 25, 2014, p. 3, <http://usarmy.vo.llnwd.net/e2/c/downloads/336945.pdf> (accessed August 26, 2015).
9. U.S. Department of Defense, *United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request: Overview*, p. 8-1.

In FY 2015, total Army end strength was 1,042,000 soldiers: 490,000 active-duty soldiers, 202,000 in the Army Reserve, and 350,000 in the Army National Guard.¹⁰ In FY 2015, all soldiers in the Active Component were paid for in the base budget.¹¹ This is unlike FY 2014, when a portion of personnel costs was paid through the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) budget function.

In addition to the U.S. Army, the U.S. Marine Corps also plays a crucial ground combat role. Worldwide, more than 31,000 Marines are forward deployed and engaged.¹² Throughout the year, Marines engage in various operations elsewhere; for example, they supported the evacuation of the U.S. embassy in Sana'a, Yemen, in 2015.¹³

Per the DSG, maintaining the Marine Corps' crisis response capability is critical. Thus, given the imposed fiscal constraints, the Marines have prioritized "near-term readiness" at the expense of other areas, such as capacity, capability, modernization, home station readiness, and infrastructure.¹⁴ This trade-off is a short-term fix to meet immediate needs: Over the longer term, the degradation of investment in equipment will lead to lowered readiness.

The Marine Corps has managed the reduction in funding by cutting capacity. The Corps' measures of capacity are similar to the Army's: end strength and units (battalions for the Marines and brigades for the Army). End strength has been decreased from a force of 202,100 active personnel in FY 2012¹⁵ to 184,100 in FY 2015.¹⁶ Of these 184,100 Marines, 1,400 were funded from the OCO budget.¹⁷ For FY 2016, the Marine Corps requested a pause in capacity cuts (to remain at an end strength of 184,000) in order to reduce the "impact on deployment to dwell ratios" and "assess the impact of its four-year drawdown."¹⁸ The drawdown is expected to continue in FY 2017, when the Corps will reach an "enduring" end strength of 182,000 active personnel, funded entirely from the base budget.¹⁹ The Department of Defense estimated in 2014 that if sequestration cuts occurred in FY 2016, end strength would be cut further to 175,000 by FY 2017.²⁰ With a force of that size, the Marine Corps would be unable to meet the requirements of the DSG and, according to General Joseph Dunford, Commandant of the Marine Corps, a new strategy would need to be developed.²¹

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10. McHugh and Odierno, "On the Posture of the United States Army," 2015, pp. 8-9.
 11. Major General Thomas A. Horlander and Davis S. Welch, "FY 2016 Army Budget Overview," February 2015, p. 8, <http://asafm.army.mil/Documents/OfficeDocuments/Budget/budgetmaterials/fy16/overview.pdf> (accessed March 18, 2015), and Department of the Army, *Military Personnel, Army, Justification Book*, "Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 President's Budget Submission," February 2015, p. 9, <http://asafm.army.mil/Documents/OfficeDocuments/Budget/budgetmaterials/fy16/milpers/mpa.pdf> (accessed March 18, 2015).
 12. General John M. Paxton Jr., Assistant Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps, testimony before the Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, March 25, 2015, p. 23, <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/15-34%20-%20203-25-15.pdf> (accessed April 22, 2015).
 13. General Joseph Dunford, Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps, statement before the Subcommittee on Defense, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives, February 26, 2015, p. 7, http://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/CMC%20Testimony%202015/USMC%20FY16%20Written%20Posture%20Statement_FINAL.pdf (accessed April 8, 2015).
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
 16. U.S. Department of Defense, *United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request: Overview*, p. A-2.
 17. *Ibid.*
 18. Department of the Navy, "Section 2: Introductory Statement," in *Department of the Navy Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 Budget Estimates: Military Personnel, Marine Corps*, February 2015, p. 5, http://www.secnav.navy.mil/fmc/fmb/Documents/16pres/MPMC_Book.pdf (accessed April 9, 2015).
 19. *Ibid.*
 20. U.S. Department of Defense, *Estimated Impacts of Sequestration-Level Funding: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2015 Budget Request*, April 2014, p. 3-2, http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Estimated_Impacts_of_Sequestration-Level_Funding_April.pdf (accessed August 26, 2015).
 21. General Joseph F. Dunford Jr., Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps, testimony in "Impact of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and Sequestration on National Security," hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, January 28, 2015, pp. 32-33, <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/15-04%20-%20201-28-15.pdf> (accessed April 9, 2015).

In 2010, the Marine Corps determined that its ideal force size would be 186,800 in light of the requirements of the President's National Security Strategy.²² However, given the budget pressures from the 2011 Budget Control Act and the 2012 DSG, the Corps decided that a force size of "182,100 active component Marines could still be afforded with reduced modernization and infrastructure support."²³

One impact of reduced capacity is a reduction in dwell time. The stated ideal deployment-to-dwell (D2D) time ratio is 1:3 (one month deployed for every three months at home), which is possible with 186,000 troops.²⁴ The "fundamental difference" between that optimal force size and an active end strength of 182,000 is a lower D2D ratio of 1:2, which translates to roughly seven-month deployments separated by stretches of 14 months at home.²⁵ Under the budget caps imposed by the Budget Control Act, capacity will be reduced even further, and the dwell ratio for the Marine Corps could fall to 1:1.²⁶ This increase in deployment frequency would worsen the degradation of readiness as people and equipment would be used more frequently, with less time to recover between deployments.

1. U.S. Ground Forces in Europe

U.S. Interests in Europe. Europe matters to the safety and well-being of the United States. Some of America's most important allies, such as Germany, France (the oldest), and the United Kingdom (the closest) are in Europe. The U.S. shares a strong commitment to the rule of law, human rights, free markets, and democracy with Europe in general. Many of these ideas, the foundations upon which America was built, were brought over by the millions of immigrants from Europe in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. U.S. sacrifice for Europe has been dear in two world wars. During the course of the 20th century, millions of Americans fought for a free and secure Europe.

U.S. economic ties with Europe are important, too. A stable, secure, and economically viable

Europe is in America's economic interest. Regional security means economic viability and prosperity. For more than 70 years, the U.S. military presence in Europe has contributed to European stability, which has economically benefited both Europeans and Americans. The economies of the 28 member states of the European Union, along with the United States, account for approximately half of the global economy. The U.S. and the members of the European Union are each other's principal trading partners.

Basing U.S. forces in Europe generates benefits in and beyond Europe. One of the most obvious benefits of having U.S. troops in Europe is its geographical proximity to some of the most dangerous and contested regions of the world. This proximity of U.S. forces gives policymakers the ability to respond quickly to a crisis. To the south of Europe, from the eastern Atlantic Ocean to the Middle East and up to the Caucasus through Russia and into the Arctic, is an arc of instability. This region is experiencing increasing instability from demographic pressures, increased commodity prices, interstate and intrastate conflict, tribal politics, competition over water and other natural resources, religious tension, revolutionary tendencies, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and "frozen conflicts" (conflicts in which active combat has ended, but the conflict remains unresolved). Europe also has some of the world's most vital shipping lanes, energy resources, and trade choke points.

Recent instability in North Africa and the Levant has shown the utility of basing robust U.S. military capabilities near global hot spots. For example, when ordered to intervene in Libya against dictator Muammar Qadhafi, U.S. commanders in Europe were able to act effectively and promptly because of the well-established and mature U.S. military footprint in southern Europe.

Threats to U.S. Interests in Europe. U.S. security obligations in Europe derive primarily from the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty and U.S. membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

22. Dunford, statement, February 26, 2015, p. 10.

23. General James F. Amos, Commandant of the Marine Corps, "2014 Report to Congress on the Posture of the United States Marine Corps," testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, March 12, 2014, p. 12, http://www.hqmc.marines.mil/portals/142/docs/FY_2015_CMC_POSTURE_STATEMENT.pdf (accessed July 16, 2015).

24. Ibid.

25. Dunford, statement, February 26, 2015, pp. 24-25.

26. Dunford, testimony, January 28, 2015, p. 74.

(NATO). Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty states that an attack on one NATO member is an attack on all members. This means that the U.S. must be as committed to the security of Europe as it is to its own.

Russia's aggressive activity in Central and Eastern Europe presents the single largest threat to the U.S. and its allies in Europe. Furthermore, Russia is the only state adversary in the region with the capability to threaten the U.S. homeland—both with conventional and with non-conventional means. Although there is no indication that Russia plans to use its capabilities against the United States absent a broader conflict involving America's NATO allies, the plausible potential for such a scenario serves to sustain Russia's strategic importance to American military planners. Russia's explicitly belligerent behavior in 2015²⁷ further adds to the necessity that the U.S. give due consideration to the ability of Russia to place the security of the U.S. at risk.

Current U.S. Ground Force Presence in Europe. The commonly held belief that U.S. forces are in Europe to protect European allies from a threat that no longer exists is wrong. Forward-basing U.S. troops in Europe is just as important now as it was during the Cold War, albeit for different reasons.

At its peak during the Cold War, the U.S. had approximately 300,000 soldiers in Europe operating across 1,200 sites due to the Soviet threat to Western Europe. During the early 1990s, as part of the so-called peace dividend following the end of the Cold War, the number of U.S. soldiers in Europe was slashed. Between 1990 and 1993, the number of U.S. soldiers in Europe decreased from 213,000 to 122,000—while the soldiers' workload increased. During that same period, from 1990 to 1993, the U.S. Army in Europe supported 42 deployments that required 95,579 personnel. Today, only 30,000 U.S. soldiers are permanently based in Europe.²⁸

Until recently the core of U.S. ground forces in Europe had been the four Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs). Before 2013, the U.S. Army had two heavy BCTs in Europe, the 170th and 172nd BCTs in Germany; one airborne Infantry BCT, the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Italy; and, one Stryker BCT, the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Germany.

The deactivation of the 170th BCT took place in October 2012—slightly earlier than the planned date of 2013—marking the end of 50 years of U.S. combat soldiers in Baumholder, Germany. The deactivation of the 172nd BCT took place in October 2013. In all, this meant that more than 10,500 soldiers were removed from Europe. These two heavy brigades also constituted Europe's primary armored force. Their deactivation left a significant capability gap not only in the U.S. ground forces committed to Europe, but in NATO's capabilities, too, a concern noted by the 2005 Overseas Basing Commission, which warned against removing heavy BCTs from Europe.

When the decision was announced in 2012 to bring two BCTs home, the Obama Administration said that the reduction in capability would be offset with a U.S.-based BCT that would, when necessary, rotate forces, normally at the battalion level, to Europe for training missions. This decision unsettled America's allies because a rotational battalion does not offer the same capability as two permanently based BCTs. According to General Philip Breedlove, Commander of U.S. Forces Europe, "Permanently stationed forces are a force multiplier that rotational deployments can never match."²⁹

The number of U.S. installations in Europe has declined steadily since the Cold War when, for example, in 1990, the U.S. Army alone had more than 850 sites in Europe. Today, the total number for all services is approximately 350. In January 2015, the Department of Defense announced the outcome of its European Infrastructure Consolidation review which will see the closure of 15 minor sites across Europe.³⁰

27. Damien Sharkov, "Russia Has Threatened Nuclear Attack, Says Ukraine Defence Minister," *Newsweek*, September 1, 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-has-threatened-nuclear-attack-says-ukraine-defence-minister-267842> (accessed August 27, 2015).

28. Michelle Tan, "Army Wants to Double Tanks, Boost Soldiers in Europe," *Army Times*, July 15, 2015, <http://www.armytimes.com/story/military/careers/army/2015/07/15/army-plans-double-equipment-boost-soldiers-europe/30187329/> (accessed August 27, 2015).

29. General Philip M. Breedlove, "Posture Statement," Armed Services Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, February 25, 2015, p. 3, <http://www.eucom.mil/mission/background/posture-statement> (accessed August 26, 2015).

30. News release, "DoD Announces European Infrastructure Consolidation Actions and F-35 Basing in Europe," U.S. Department of Defense, January 8, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/Releases/Release.aspx?ReleaseID=17097> (accessed March 19, 2015).

Crucially, the U.S. Marine Corps provides the U.S. with rapid reaction capability to protect U.S. embassies in North Africa. The Special-Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force-Crisis Response-Africa (SPMAGTF) is currently located in Spain, Italy, and Romania and provides a response force of 1,550 Marines. Spain recently agreed to allow the U.S. Marine Corps to station up to 3,000 Marines permanently at Morón Air Base. This has been particularly important since September 2013, when the U.S. ambassador to Libya and three others were killed in Benghazi, and due to the rise of the Islamic State in North Africa.

After Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014, the U.S. and NATO were caught off guard. Instead of being prepared for Russian aggression, the U.S. had to rush through a number of policy U-turns:

- After removing all main battle tanks from Europe in 2013,³¹ the U.S. Army is now bringing back tanks to be pre-positioned across Central and Eastern European countries.³²
- After cancelling 45 percent of military-to-military training events with European partners in 2013, the U.S. is now increasing mil-to-mil training in Europe.³³
- After removing two BCTs from Europe, the U.S. is now routinely rotating a battalion from the U.S. to Europe for training and is pre-positioning the equipment for one armored brigade combat team in Central and Eastern Europe.

In addition to these embarrassing but necessary reversals in policy, the U.S. has taken a number of welcome, if modest, additional steps to boost the

defenses of NATO's eastern members. The measures are carried out through the auspices of NATO's Operation Atlantic Resolve and the U.S.'s European Reassurance Initiative. Some of the more noteworthy policy decisions include:

- The continuous deployment since May 2014 of a U.S. Army company (around 150 soldiers) in each of the three Baltic states and Poland.
- An increase of U.S.-led and NATO-led training exercises in the region.
- The creation of a so-called pre-positioned European Activity Set, which includes 250 tanks, infantry, fighting vehicles, and self-propelled artillery—about a brigade's worth of equipment—to be placed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria.³⁴
- Funding for improving military infrastructure, such as ground and air training, and staging sites in the Baltic region.³⁵

It is debatable whether these measures have a real deterrence effect against Russian aggression. While 150 soldiers in each of the Baltic states and Poland might have a strategic communications effect, they would have very little tactical impact in the event of a Russian invasion. The one battalion that will rotate from the U.S. to carry out training in Europe is clearly no substitute to the two BCTs that were withdrawn from Europe in 2013. Prepositioning dozens of tanks in storage across the region is no substitute for two brigades' worth of tanks—with all the soldiers required to operate them—on the ground in Europe, as the U.S. had up to 2013.

31. John Vandiver, "US Army's Last Tanks Depart from Germany," *Stars and Stripes*, April 4, 2013, <http://www.stripes.com/news/us-army-s-last-tanks-depart-from-germany-1.214977> (accessed July 2, 2015).

32. Michael S. Darnell, "American Tanks Return to Europe After Brief Leave," *Stars and Stripes*, January 31, 2014, <http://www.stripes.com/news/american-tanks-return-to-europe-after-brief-leave-1.264910> (accessed July 2, 2015).

33. Andrew Tilgham, "NATO Bases Critical for U.S., Leader Says," *Army Times*, August 19, 2013, <http://www.armytimes.com/article/20130819/NEWS/308190010/NATO-bases-critical-for-U-S-leader-says> (accessed July 2, 2015).

34. Darnell, "American Tanks Return to Europe After Brief Leave."

35. News release, "European Reassurance Initiative and Other U.S. Efforts in Support of NATO Allies and Partners," Embassy of the United States, Vilnius, Lithuania, June 18, 2015, http://vilnius.usembassy.gov/press_releases/2015/06/18/2016--european-reassurance-initiative-and-other-u.s.-efforts-in-support-of-nato-allies-and-partners (accessed July 6, 2015), and news release, "EUCOM Provides Update on the European Reassurance Initiative," U.S. European Command, April 20, 2015, <http://www.eucom.mil/media-library/article/33026/eucom-provides-update-on-the-european-reassurance-initiative> (accessed July 6, 2015).

Missions and Tasks. U.S. ground forces in Europe are likely to perform three key missions:

1. The first mission is geared toward Russia and America's treaty obligations under NATO. The U.S. must have the required ground forces to deter Russian aggression and defend NATO members from Moscow's imperialist tendencies. The U.S. must ensure that it has the political will and military capability required to live up to its NATO treaty obligations in Europe. Defending NATO's European members and deterring Russian aggression will be far easier, and much cheaper, than liberating them.
2. The second mission for U.S. ground forces in Europe will be to respond to specific and short-term crises in North Africa or the Middle East. This requires forces that are agile and able to deploy quickly to secure a U.S. embassy, for example. Since the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in 2012 that resulted in the deaths of four American officials (including the U.S. ambassador to Libya) the requirement for such a capability is now obvious.
3. The third mission for U.S. ground forces in Europe will be supporting other U.S. large-scale combat operations in more distant places around the world. In part, U.S. ground forces carry out this mission by training NATO allies for overseas deployment or by using Europe as a staging area for onward deployments. Afghanistan is a great example of this. During the height of combat operations in Afghanistan in 2010, the U.S. carried out 33 major multinational training exercises involving 50,000 troops from 40 countries in Europe. If not for these European troops in Afghanistan, the U.S. would have had to deploy more troops.

The Future of U.S. Ground Forces in Europe.

Recent decisions to reduce the size of the U.S. military footprint in Europe appear to have been based not on an empirical or strategic review of U.S. force requirements in Europe but on perceived financial savings. This is dangerous, shortsighted, and based

on the false assumption that the U.S. can project the same degree of power with rotational forces that it currently does with permanently based troops.

In order to maintain the ground forces needed to achieve U.S. goals in the European theater, the U.S. should:

- **Return to a 2012 baseline for troop numbers.** The U.S. should return the two heavy BCTs to Europe, and bring the total of U.S. BCTs in Europe back to four. These forces do not have to return to their previous home bases in Germany, but could be placed in newer NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe.
- **Carry out a strategic review of U.S. interests in Europe.** After returning to the 2012 baseline, the U.S. should carry out a proper review of its ground force requirement for Europe. This review, not the arbitrary need to cut the defense budget, should then guide the important decisions, such as the number of bases and the distribution of troops in Europe.

The U.S. military presence in Europe deters America's adversaries, strengthens allies, and protects U.S. interests—the U.S. reduces the number of these troops at its peril. The U.S. can project power and react to the unexpected because of its forward-based military capabilities in Europe. Reducing these capabilities will only weaken America on the world stage.

2. U.S. Ground Forces in the Asia-Pacific Region

U.S. Interests in Asia and the Pacific. Since the founding of the American republic, Asia has been a key area of interest for the United States for both economic and security reasons.³⁶ At present, Asia contains more than half the world's population; two of the three largest global economies (China and Japan); and the world's fastest-growing economies, which generate 40 percent of the world's growth in gross domestic product—more than any other region. Asia is America's largest trading partner, accounting for 38 percent of total U.S. trade in goods for 2013.

36. Wood, ed., *2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength*.

In the 21st century, the importance of Asia to the United States will continue to grow. Already, Asian markets absorb over a quarter of American exports in goods and services and, combined, support one-third of all American export-related jobs. Consequently, control of Asia by a hostile power would threaten American economic and security national interests.

Stability in Asia is already being threatened by a number of factors: North Korea's substantial military capabilities, China's increasingly aggressive behavior, lingering disputes of ideology and sovereignty, historical animosities, and rising nationalism. Five Asian states possess nuclear weapons: China, North Korea, India, Pakistan, and Russia.

Given the vast distances and the separation of many states by significant bodies of water, the Indo-Pacific region might be considered primarily a largely air-centric and naval-centric theater. However, any U.S. military policy in Asia requires an integrated strategy utilizing all military forces, including ground forces, which play a critical role in maintaining regional stability.

Attaining and defending U.S. national interests in Asia requires bases and access, sufficient forward-deployed U.S. military forces in Asia to deter aggression, robust follow-on forces, and strong alliances and security relationships with Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, Taiwan, and Singapore.

Threats to U.S. Interests in Asia and the Pacific. America's forward-deployed military at bases throughout the Western Pacific, five treaty allies, security partners in Taiwan and Singapore, and growing security partnership with India are keys to the U.S. strategic footprint in Asia. One of its critical allies, South Korea, is under active threat of invasion from the North. Taiwan is under a long-standing, well-equipped, and purposely positioned military threat from China. Japan and the Philippines, by virtue of maritime territorial disputes, are under growing paramilitary, military, and political pressure from China.

North Korea is the wolf closest to the sled—the most immediate threat of large-scale military hostilities that would require a major response by U.S. ground forces. North Korea has approximately 1 million people in its military, with reserves numbering several million more. Pyongyang has

forward-deployed 70 percent of its ground forces within 90 miles of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), making it possible to attack with little or no warning

China's long-standing threat to prevent de jure independence of Taiwan, and ultimately to bring it under authority of Beijing—if necessary, take Taiwan by force—is both a threat to a major American security partner and a threat to U.S. interest in peace and stability in the Western Pacific.

Current U.S. Ground Force Presence in Asia and the Pacific. USARPAC—the U.S. Army in the Pacific—is the Army's component command in the Pacific. It supplies Army forces as necessary for various contingencies. It administers one infantry division, the 25th Infantry Division, which has two of its brigades based in Hawaii and two in Alaska (U.S. Army Alaska), as well as various other elements in Japan and Hawaii.

Because of the unique situation on the Korean peninsula, two subcomponents of Pacific Command (PACOM) are U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) and the U.S. Eighth Army. USFK is a joint headquarters, led by a four-star U.S. general. It is in charge of the various U.S. military elements on the Korean peninsula. The U.S. Eighth Army operates in conjunction with USFK, as well as the United Nations presence (in the form of United Nations Command).

The United States currently maintains troops in South Korea, the largest concentration of American forces on the Asian mainland. Over the past several decades, the American presence on the peninsula has slowly declined. In the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon withdrew the 7th Infantry Division. Each decrease in U.S. forces has generated considerable South Korean anxiety over the viability of alliance capabilities and resolve. In response to South Korean fear of abandonment, President George W. Bush committed the U.S. to maintaining 28,500 troops, a pledge maintained by Barack Obama.

As part of the U.S. relationship with Japan, the United States maintains some 38,000 military personnel, and another 5,000 Department of Defense civilian employees, in Japan, under the rubric of U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ). These forces include the bulk of the Third Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) on Okinawa. U.S. ground forces regularly train with their Japanese counterparts; in recent years, these have expanded from air and

naval exercises to practicing amphibious operations together.³⁷

Australia is one of the most important American allies in the Asia-Pacific. U.S.–Australia security ties date back to World War I, when U.S. forces fought under Australian command on the Western Front. A key part of the Obama Administration’s “Asia pivot” was to deploy additional United States Marines to Australia. Eventually expected to total some 2,500 troops, the initial contingent of forces are based near the northern city of Darwin.

Claims by the Obama Administration that U.S. forces in the Pacific will be immune from duties elsewhere, or from budget cuts that will affect the U.S. Joint Force over the next several years, simply do not hold water. Though the U.S. Army and Marine Corps were increased by 100,000 troops to handle the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, U.S. soldiers and Marines were redeployed from Asia to serve in those wars.

General Curtis Scaparrotti, commander of U.N. and U.S. forces in Korea, testified that he has doubts about America’s ability to counter a large-scale North Korean attack effectively due to the low readiness of forces stationed outside Korea. He warned that “[a]ny delay in the arrival or reduction in readiness of these forces would lengthen the time required to accomplish key missions in crisis or war, likely resulting in higher civilian and military casualties.”³⁸

Beyond the Korean peninsula, naval and amphibious operations are the backbone of U.S. military deterrence and defense capabilities in the Pacific. Despite this, Admiral Samuel Locklear III, then PACOM commander, testified that the Navy and Marine Corps do not have enough assets to carry out contested amphibious operations in the Pacific if a crisis were to arise.

Then-Marine Commandant General James Amos warned that planned defense cuts could “translate into increased loss of personnel and materiel, and

ultimately [place] mission accomplishment at risk.”³⁹ General Raymond Odierno, then the Army Chief of Staff, told Congress that “should a contingency arise, there may not be enough time to avoid sending forces into harm’s way unprepared.”⁴⁰

Missions and Tasks. U.S. ground forces in the Asia-Pacific theater fulfill numerous strategic requirements:

- 1. Acting as a tangible sign of America’s commitment to defend Asia.** U.S. forward-deployed forces in Asia are indisputable signals of Washington’s commitment to the alliance obligations to defend its allies and maintain peace and stability in Asia. U.S. ground forces in Asia are also a clear rebuttal to perceptions of waning United States resolve in the face of a rising and assertive China.
- 2. Deterring aggression.** History has repeatedly shown that ground troops are necessary to influence an opponent. Nothing is more likely to ensure large-scale American retaliation than an attack on American ground forces. The forward deployment of U.S. forces enables immediate reaction to emerging threats. Reducing ground combat elements would degrade U.S. deterrence capacity and limit response options.
- 3. Enabling conduct of full-spectrum combat operations.** The Third Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) on Okinawa is a flexible, scalable, tailored, self-contained, rapidly deployable, powerful military force that can fulfill any contingency that might arise throughout the region. U.S. Army units can provide missile and air defense, including against unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as special operations forces to conduct unconventional warfare operations.

37. Dean Cheng, “America Needs a Comprehensive Strategy for Countering China’s Expanding Perimeter of National Interests,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4397, April 28, 2015, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/04/america-needs-a-comprehensive-strategy-for-countering-chinas-expanding-perimeter-of-national-interests>.

38. General Curtis M. Scaparrotti, Commander, United Nations Command; Commander, United States–Republic of Korea Combined Forces Command; and Commander, United States Forces Korea, statement before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, March 25, 2014, http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Scaparrotti_03-25-14.pdf (accessed August 27, 2015).

39. General James F. Amos, Commandant of the Marine Corps, “The Future of the Military Services and Consequences of Defense Sequestration,” statement before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, November 2, 2011, at http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=08eaf78f-203b-4804-ad15-8593b91a86e2 (accessed September 18, 2015).

40. David Ignatius, “Sequestration Is Feeding a Slow-Motion Decay,” *The Washington Post*, June 21, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/david-ignatius-sequestration-is-feeding-a-slow-motion-decay/2013/06/21/874be74c-d9ef-11e2-a016-92547bf094cc_story.html (accessed September 18, 2015).

4. Defeating a North Korean invasion of South Korea. U.S. Army forces on the Korean peninsula would provide the immediate ground force response to a full-scale North Korean attack. The U.S. Marines on Okinawa also play a critical role in Operation Plan 5027, the joint U.S.–South Korean war plan for responding to a North Korean invasion. Marine forces could conduct a full range of combat operations in Korea while even the threat of an amphibious invasion would force North Korea to divert ground forces from the front line. These initial units would, however, require extensive reinforcements—the current plan calls for 690,000 U.S. troops.⁴¹

5. Assisting U.S. response to Korea crisis contingencies other than war. U.S. ground forces can conduct several military operations on the Korean peninsula, including limited amphibious raids and full-scale amphibious assaults, airfield-seizure and port-seizure operations, maritime interdiction operations, amphibious advanced force operations, stability operations, and tactical air support.

6. Augmenting allies that lack substantial ground forces. For example, Japan lacks any Marine forces of its own, has ground forces that are less capable than their U.S. counterparts, and has poor combined arms operation capabilities. Other allies, such as South Korea and Australia, have strong ground force capabilities but would require support from U.S. ground units for many contingencies. Revived tensions in the Taiwan Strait or South China Sea might entail the deployment of some American ground forces to places like Taiwan, the Philippines, or even Vietnam, to deter further escalation.

Beyond the military realm, U.S. ground forces also play a diplomatic role of influence. For much of Asia, ground forces remain the foremost part of the military in terms of bureaucratic power, overshadowing their air and naval counterparts. Consequently, while local militaries would interact with senior American military officers of any service, there are certain cultural and professional commonalities that

are shared among people drawn from the same service (navy to navy, or army to army). Having senior U.S. Army officers as part of the military diplomatic team is an important part of relationship building throughout the region.

The Future of U.S. forces in Asia and the Pacific. For the U.S. to be capable of deterring aggression in Asia, America’s opponents must believe that any belligerent act will invite a retaliatory response. Such a response must be able to inflict such cost and pain as to outweigh any potential benefit sought by the aggressor—thereby leading the aggressor to refrain from initiating a military attack in the first place. To deter an adversary, the threat of retaliation must be credible—which requires both viable military means and a demonstrated unquestionable resolve to use them. U.S. ground forces play an important role in all of this.

At a minimum, the U.S. must maintain current U.S. ground force levels in Asia. Regional militaries want to interact with the premier global military, especially their ground force counterparts in the U.S. Army. The presence of robust American ground forces in the Asia–Pacific region supports American efforts to engage Asian countries. From small unit exchanges to large-scale exercises, such as Ulchi Freedom Guardian or Cobra Gold, American ground force elements promote closer relations. Indeed, the effort to establish “regionally aligned forces”—where certain units would be earmarked for Asia–Pacific (and other regional) contingencies, and would therefore establish unit-to-unit relationships and in-depth familiarity with the region—offers a prime opportunity to build precisely these deep relations that would facilitate interoperability during a crisis or conflict.

3. U.S. Ground Forces in the Middle East and Afghanistan

U.S. Interests in the Middle East and Afghanistan. The United States has a long history of involvement in the Middle East—the oil-rich region situated at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and Africa where a number of critical trade routes converge. Home to the Suez Canal, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Strait of Hormuz, the region is critically important to seaborne trade—especially the transit of oil.⁴² While the U.S. has become increasingly energy independent

41. Bruce Klinger, “The Missing Asia Pivot in Obama’s Defense Strategy,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3663, January 6, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/01/the-missing-asia-pivot-in-obamas-defense-strategy>.

42. Wood, ed., *2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, p. 183.

(domestic oil production has increased by 50 percent since 2008⁴³) and therefore less dependent on foreign oil originating in the Middle East, many U.S. allies still depend on energy from the region, meaning that continued engagement is economically vital.

Economic considerations, while important, are only part of the story, as engagement with the Middle East has largely been driven by national security objectives since 9/11. Working with coalition partners and allies to defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, the U.S. handed significant defeats to terrorist organizations that were previously operating freely in uncontested and ungoverned spaces.

Due to a premature withdrawal of military forces from Iraq in 2011 and a lack of sustained engagement from American political leadership, al-Qaeda, its various affiliates and offshoots, such as ISIS (formerly al-Qaeda in Iraq), were able to establish control over large swaths of Iraq and Syria. Al-Qaeda and ISIS also have established smaller sanctuaries in Libya, Somalia, and Yemen, where they have exploited power vacuums in failed states crippled by civil wars. The rise of ISIS, along with continued regional subversion by proxies sponsored by the Iranian government, have produced an extremely tenuous situation today, again bringing American security interests to the fore.

Given the threats posed by al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the potential destabilization of the region stemming from the Syrian civil war, the metastasis of the Islamic State, and the growing Iranian sphere of influence, the Middle East is truly a region in flux and enveloped in uncertainty. The immense national security significance of the region means that the next U.S. President must have a strategy for active engagement with the Middle East.

The initial inclination to shrink back and withdraw from the region must be avoided; doing so would be counterproductive and self-defeating. It would embolden adversaries and hurt U.S. allies, who are counting on a strong U.S. presence and engaged leadership to help resolve the threats facing them.

Threats to U.S. Interests in the Middle East and Afghanistan. The Middle East is one of the most complex and volatile threat environments faced by the United States and its allies. Iran, various

al-Qaeda offshoots, Hezbollah, Arab-Israeli clashes, and a growing number of radical Islamist militias and revolutionary groups in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen pose present or potential threats to the U.S. and its allies. Radical Islamist terrorism, especially from al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and ISIS, remains the most immediate threat to the safety and security of U.S. citizens at home and abroad. More broadly, threats to the U.S. homeland and to Americans abroad include terrorist threats from non-state actors, such as al-Qaeda, that use the ungoverned areas of the Middle East as a base from which to plan, train, equip, and launch attacks; terrorist threats from state-supported groups, such as Hezbollah; and the developing ballistic missile threat from Iran.

Iran is an anti-Western revolutionary state that seeks to tilt the regional balance of power in its favor by driving out the Western presence, undermining and overthrowing opposing governments, and establishing its hegemony over the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. It also seeks to radicalize Shiite communities and advance their interests against Sunni rivals. Iran has a long record of sponsoring terrorist attacks against American allies and other U.S. interests in the region. Regarding conventional threats, Iran's ground forces dwarf the relatively small armies of the other Gulf states, and its formidable ballistic missile forces pose significant threats to its neighbors.

The United States has critical interests in the Middle Eastern commons: sea, air, space, and cyberspace. The U.S. has long provided the security backbone in these areas, which has in turn supported the region's economic development and political stability.

In order to defeat threats to the American homeland, and to support allies in order to bolster regional stability, American political leaders will need to determine the ground forces required to conduct the operations aimed at securing these objectives. This will require an understanding of the situation on the ground and some insight into how it is likely to evolve.

Terrorist groups operating from Pakistan and Afghanistan pose a direct threat to the U.S. homeland and undermine critical U.S. interests in the region. These interests include prevention of military conflict between India and Pakistan, which has the potential to go nuclear, and the safety and secu-

43. Edwin J. Feulner, "Why Gasoline Prices Are Down," *The Washington Times*, December 3, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/commentary/2014/12/why-gasoline-prices-are-down> (accessed July 28, 2015).

rity of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. The U.S. should continue to lead coalition efforts to help stabilize Afghanistan by leaving a residual U.S. ground force in the country as long as necessary, and drop all arbitrary deadlines for withdrawal.

Pakistan is home to a host of terrorist groups that keep the region unstable and contribute to the spread of global terrorism. A robust drone campaign in Pakistan's tribal areas bordering Afghanistan from 2010 to 2012 helped degrade al-Qaeda's ability to plan and conduct large-scale attacks. However, al-Qaeda's core leadership in Pakistan continues to inspire and coordinate attacks, particularly through affiliated or associated organizations that operate throughout the broader Middle East.

Moreover, al-Qaeda remains allied with the Taliban, and a further drawdown in U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan would enable al-Qaeda and other global terrorist organizations to reestablish bases in the country. There are currently around 13,200 U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan as part of Operation Resolute Support to train and advise the Afghan forces. NATO formally ended combat operations in December 2014, but coalition forces regularly conduct airstrikes in support of the Afghan forces, and American Special Operations Forces continue to carry out raids on Taliban and al-Qaeda hideouts.

Current U.S. Ground Force Presence in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Currently, the U.S. maintains approximately 35,000⁴⁴ military forces in the Middle East, about 20,000⁴⁵ of which are ground combat forces. The forces are scattered geographically throughout the region in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. These ground forces join thousands of air and naval troops that are also forward-deployed in the Middle East, providing support to these ground forces in addition to performing their own mission sets.

Presently, the U.S. has approximately 3,500 military advisers in Iraq who have trained Iraqi troops and paramilitary forces, which are now preparing for offensives to take Ramadi and Fallujah.

Last year, President Obama had pledged to cut U.S. force levels in Afghanistan to 5,500 by the end of 2015, and then to zero by the end of 2016. But Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's request earlier this year that the U.S. reconsider the timeline for withdrawal, and growing concern among U.S. policymakers about the potential for Afghanistan's security to deteriorate in the absence of international forces (similar to the situation in Iraq last summer), led the White House to adjust its withdrawal schedule by keeping 9,800 troops in Afghanistan at least until the end of 2015. The White House says it remains committed to withdrawing all U.S. forces, except those necessary to protect the U.S. embassy, by the end of 2016.

Missions and Tasks. U.S. ground forces in the Middle East perform a number of traditional missions; ranging from training exercises with foreign military forces to bolstering embassy security. Specifically, they are deployed in Iraq to help the Iraqi forces and other groups, such as the Kurdish Peshmerga, take on ISIS.

If Iraqi forces seem incapable of defeating ISIS inside Iraq's territory, U.S. ground forces might have to serve a more conventional role in the fight. U.S. ground forces are also used outside Iraq in the Middle East to increase the capabilities of allied militaries to confront al-Qaeda and other regional threats. This is done through joint and multilateral training exercises.

In Afghanistan, it is necessary that U.S. forces continue to backstop the Afghan forces even though U.S. and NATO combat operations have ended.⁴⁶ Maintaining a U.S. ground force in Afghanistan has both practical and psychological purposes. It allows the U.S. to continue to provide training and other military support to the Afghan security forces, including aviation and intelligence support, battlefield advice, and capacity-building assistance. It also builds confidence among the Afghan forces, helps keep Taliban ambitions in check, and allows the U.S. a toehold in the country, in the event that fighting escalates and American forces need to re-engage in military opera-

44. David Martosko, "US Has No Plans to Send Any of Its 35,000 Middle East-Based Troops into Iraq After al-Qaeda Overruns Two Cities and Forces 500,000 to Flee for Their Lives," *The Daily Mail*, June 11, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2655485/US-no-plans-send-35-000-Middle-East-based-troops-Iraq-al-Qaeda-overruns-two-cities-forces-500-000-flee-lives.html> (accessed July 31, 2015).

45. Mackenzie Eaglen, "US Military Force Sizing for Both War and Peace," American Enterprise Institute, March 10, 2015, <https://www.aei.org/publication/us-military-force-sizing-war-peace/> (accessed July 31, 2015).

46. Lisa Curtis, "U.S. Engagement Required: Afghanistan Must Avoid an Iraq-Style Breakdown," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3038, July 23, 2015, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/07/us-engagement-required-afghanistan-must-avoid-an-iraq-style-breakdown>.

tions. A continued U.S. presence also bolsters the chances of a negotiated settlement. The more the Taliban calculates an all-out military victory is out of reach, the greater the pressure on the Taliban to accept a diplomatic solution.

In addition to helping the Afghan forces keep the Taliban at bay, the U.S. needs to maintain the ability to conduct counterterrorism missions in the country. This includes maintaining bases from which to launch drone strikes in the Afghanistan–Pakistan border areas, which remain a hotbed of activities by al-Qaeda and a host of other extremist groups intent on attacking the U.S.

An effort by ISIS to establish influence in Afghanistan is further complicating the terrorist landscape and contributing to instability. ISIS claimed responsibility for an April 18 suicide bombing that killed 35 people outside a bank in Jalalabad, and has reportedly established bases in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces.

The Future of U.S. Ground Forces in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Due to inaction by the current Administration, the threat from ISIS in the Middle East will remain for the foreseeable future. While the minimalist approach (the status quo) the current Administration has pursued may have been a viable option a few years ago, it simply has not been a realistic option since 2011, as the conditions have evolved well beyond insurgency. With ISIS carving out a caliphate in eastern Syria and western Iraq, the terror state constitutes a rising threat to the American homeland.

The next U.S. President must be prepared to inherit the burden of implementing a plan for breaking ISIS territorial control in Iraq and maintaining a stable nation after that goal is achieved.⁴⁷ There may be an acceptable medium course of action between Obama's vacillating, half-hearted initiatives and redeploying large numbers of ground troops. This might include (1) applying extensive and intensive air power; (2) embedding U.S. military advisers in Iraq's front-line military units; and (3) deploying

U.S. Special Operations forces in greater strength and embedding them with Kurdish Peshmerga and Sunni Arab tribal militias.⁴⁸ Or, the next President may quickly find that these half measures are not enough.⁴⁹ Conventional ground forces may be required to break an enemy's territorial control and drive them out. Further, there has to be a serious conversation about what kind of country Iraq should be after ISIS is defeated. After being torn apart by the ISIS invasion and Iranian meddling, Iraq will need dependable strategic partners to make itself whole again. Lacking the confident, robust, intentional involvement of the U.S., one can expect recent sorry history to repeat itself. Meanwhile, the U.S. should continue to lead coalition efforts to help stabilize Afghanistan and leave a residual U.S. force in the country as long as necessary, dropping all arbitrary deadlines for a withdrawal.⁵⁰

The next President will also need to take a different approach to deterring Iran and reassuring allies in the region. U.S. ground forces have an important role to play here. With the signing of the new nuclear deal, the Obama Administration has yielded the geopolitical high ground to Tehran, meaning that if the next President is serious about protecting American interests in the region, U.S. ground force presence must be dramatically enhanced.

The growing sphere of influence of Iran's Shiite Islamist extremist regime will certainly further destabilize the region, and will most likely lead to a deeper sectarian divide between Iran and the predominantly Sunni Arab states. If Iran is left unchecked and insufficient U.S. forces are forward-deployed, a number of Arab states—particularly Saudi Arabia—could move to acquire nuclear weapons in order to counter Tehran. Increasing U.S. ground forces in the region would help to assure U.S. allies that Washington will work with them to deter and counter Iran. Aside from overt assurance, U.S. ground forces will be required to assist allies in the region to take down the various terrorist organizations that accept military and financial aid from Tehran.

47. James Phillips, "Obama, It's Time to Stop Shifting the Blame and Develop an ISIS Strategy," *The Daily Signal*, June 12, 2015, <http://dailysignal.com/2015/06/12/obama-its-time-to-stop-shifting-the-blame-and-develop-an-isis-strategy/>.

48. *Ibid.*

49. James Jay Carafano, "Missing in Action: Where Are the Arabs in the Fight Against ISIS?" *The National Interest*, July 13, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/missing-action-where-are-the-arabs-in-the-fight-against-isis-13317> (accessed August 14, 2015).

50. Curtis, "U.S. Engagement Required: Afghanistan Must Avoid an Iraq-Style Breakdown."

To contain the threat of global terrorism, and to prevent al-Qaeda from regrouping in Afghanistan, the U.S. must maintain a robust residual force presence there. One option is to keep the 10,000 troops now deployed there in place for the foreseeable future or at least until it is clear the Afghan forces can hold their own against the Taliban. A better option would be to deploy additional troops that would be posted at bases throughout the country. Former U.S. Commander of Central Command General James Mattis told the U.S. Congress in 2013 that he had recommended to the White House that a total of 20,000 U.S. and NATO troops remain in Afghanistan post-2014 for training, support, and counterterrorism operations.⁵¹ The riskiest option is to stick with President Obama's current plan of withdrawing all U.S. forces except those necessary to protect the U.S. embassy by the end of 2016. Similar to Iraq, Afghanistan could quickly erupt into chaos if the U.S. and international forces depart as hastily as currently scheduled.

At a minimum, the U.S. must maintain current ground force levels in the country so long as conditions on the ground merit it. President Obama's decision to extend U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan by at least six months is welcome, but he should scrap all deadlines for withdrawal. If the Taliban retakes territory in Afghanistan, core al-Qaeda would be able to revive itself and again find a facilitative environment from which to operate, just as it did before 9/11. This would be an unacceptable situation in terms of U.S. national security.

Conclusion

The Administration's cuts to U.S. ground forces weaken America and its allies. The decision to remove a large number of U.S. troops and their associated military capabilities from Europe, the hollow pivot to Asia, which has not increased U.S. capability in the region, and the standoffish approach to the Middle East has sent a message to friend and foe alike.

In order to deal with the threats emanating from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the next Administration must ensure the availability of adequate

ground forces. To this end, the next President of the United States should:

- **Return to a 2012 baseline for troop numbers in Europe.** The U.S. should return the two heavy BCTs to Europe, bringing the total of U.S. BCTs in Europe back to four. These forces do not have to return to their previous home bases in Germany but could be placed in newer NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe.
- **Carry out strategic review of U.S. interests in Europe.** After returning to the 2012 baseline, the U.S. should carry out a proper review of its ground force requirement for Europe. This review, not the arbitrary need to cut the defense budget, should then guide the important decisions, such as the number of bases and the distribution of troops in Europe.
- **Maintain current ground force levels in Afghanistan so long as conditions on the ground merit it.** President Obama's decision to extend temporary U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan was welcome, but all deadlines for withdrawal should be scrapped. A conditions-based approach should be taken instead.
- **Maintain current ground force levels in Asia.** In order to confront all the security challenges in the Asia-Pacific region, the U.S. must have enough ground forces either based in the theater or at a level of readiness to quickly deploy to the theater, if required. This means ensuring that U.S. Army and Marine Corps forces based in the region are not deployed on operations elsewhere.
- **Increase U.S. ground forces in the Middle East to drive ISIS from Iraq.** This will include more trainers and embedded personnel with Peshmerga, tribal militia units, and Iraqi forces. Conventional U.S. ground forces may be required to remove ISIS's territorial control and drive them out of Iraq.

51. Thom Shanker, "General Says 20,000 Troops Should Stay in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/06/world/middleeast/us-general-says-20000-troops-should-stay-in-afghanistan.html?_r=0 (accessed August 27, 2015).

The presence of U.S. ground forces in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East deters America's adversaries, strengthens allies, and protects U.S. interests. Whether preparing U.S. and allied troops and deploying them on operations, or responding to a crisis in a particular region, the U.S. can more quickly and effectively project power and react to the unexpected by using its forward-based ground forces. Reducing this capability will simply make America weaker on the world stage.

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