

## MILITARY ENGAGEMENT AND FORWARD PRESENCE: DOWN BUT NOT OUT AS TOOLS TO SHAPE AND WIN

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Reliance on precision strike stand-off capabilities and a strategy of surging American military might from the continental United States (CONUS) after a crisis has already started have become particularly attractive approaches for managing insecurity in a more resource-constrained environment. However, the security challenges facing the United States and its vital interests over the coming years require more than a retreat to “Fortress America.” Relying on stand-off capabilities and surge readiness cannot provide adequate deterrence or reassurance, promote effective regional security, or build the capability and interoperability necessary to succeed in combined military operations at reasonable cost, and will have the effect of reducing, not expanding, options available to any President. Mitigating the security challenges of tomorrow necessitates investment in a more effective and more efficient set of tools.

Two such tools—forward presence and, when employed selectively, military engagement—can help to promote stability and security in contexts short of major interstate war. Moreover, engagement and presence can also contribute dramatically to operational capacity and capability across a range of military operations, including major interstate war. Military engagement and forward presence have been essential tools allowing the United States to wield influence around the globe, yielding greater stability in peacetime and greater effectiveness in times of conflict, yet both are imperiled today.

Military engagement programs—often referred to as security cooperation—enable the United States to achieve the following strategic objectives:

- Enhance the ability of America’s foreign partners to maintain stability and security in their

own neighborhoods;

- Deter adversaries;
- Assure allies;
- Develop the capabilities of coalition partners for current and future operations;
- Improve the ability of U.S. forces to operate with international partners; and,
- Reduce the number of American boots on the ground in a military operation.

However, there is a longstanding—and incorrect—assumption that military engagement detracts from readiness. In fact, the opposite is true—military engagement contributes directly to unit readiness by building and maintaining coalition capability and interoperability. Other critics cite the examples of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, concluding that military engagement does not work. In reality, the evidence is far more nuanced and other successful cases can shed light on when, where, and how engagement works.

Like military engagement, forward presence provides an effective and efficient means of achieving several U.S. strategic objectives, including:

- Deterring aggression against vital interests more effectively than CONUS-based forces;
- Assuring allies through a tangible U.S. commitment;
- Enabling a more effective response to security crises when and if they occur by being closer to crises;
- Providing access to en route infrastructure and the lines of communication necessary for collective defense and specific U.S. and allied operations; and,

- Contributing directly to building and maintaining interoperability with America’s most likely and most capable coalition partners.

Some have argued that rotational deployment models are a good substitute for permanent presence. However, a rotationally deployed force from CONUS is unlikely to deter effectively because it is unable to prevent “opportunity motivated” aggressors—especially nuclear-armed ones—from seeking a *fait accompli* with a quick, successful military operation occurring between rotations. Moreover, a rotational deployment from CONUS during a period of insecurity is likely to be interpreted as escalatory.

Additionally, rotationally deployed forces from CONUS are unlikely to arrive in theater as well-informed about local or regional culture, habits, standard operating procedures, and rules and regulations. Finally, arguments favoring rotational deployments based on cost are somewhat misleading and not necessarily reflective of data from recent rotational deployments to Europe.

The inability to surge quickly enough, the incorrect assumptions about reduced cost, the risks of appearing escalatory, the loss of global influence, and the failure to deter and assure are all concomitant with a strategy of surging as circumstances demand and/or relying on stand-off capabilities. Continuing pockets of institutional bias against engagement as a force multiplier and readiness enhancer and significant cuts to overseas permanent presence have com-

bined to limit the leverage possible through engagement and forward presence. Reversing these trends will require bureaucratic courage and leadership, and a deeper institutional embrace of engagement as well as forward presence.

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