

ROTATIONAL DEPLOYMENTS VS. FORWARD STATIONING: HOW CAN THE ARMY ACHIEVE ASSURANCE AND DETERRENCE EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY?

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For the purposes of efficiently and effectively assuring allies and deterring adversaries in Europe and on the Korean Peninsula, the Army's force posture is out of balance today, with insufficient units and Soldiers stationed overseas. Since the end of the Cold War—during which hundreds of thousands of Soldiers were stationed overseas—the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of a U.S.-stationed Army, yielding an over-reliance on rotational deployments for continuous heel-to-toe presence to achieve deterrence and assurance effectively and at reasonable, sustainable cost.

The preceding assessment is the result of a 10-month study examining the costs and benefits—defined broadly—of rotational deployments versus forward stationing. Not all of the available quantitative and qualitative data point in the same direction. There are indeed a myriad of sometimes conflicting costs and benefits that must be considered in determining whether and how U.S. Army posture has become unbalanced and what to do about it.

In light of data and other evidence from actual rotations to Europe and South Korea over the last 2 to 3 years, the original arguments in favor of rotational presence do not appear as valid today. This recent evidence essentially undermines the claims made in 2003-2004 and again in 2010-2011 that the Department of Defense (DoD) could achieve key objectives such as deterrence and assurance more effectively and efficiently through increased reliance on Army rotational presence in

lieu of forward stationing. Other key findings of this study include the following:

- There is strong evidence to support the conclusion that in the cases of both Europe and South Korea, the DoD is spending more than was originally anticipated to maintain heel-to-toe rotational presence.
 - Rotational heel-to-toe presence is more expensive than forward stationing when the units in question are armored units taking their own equipment on each rotation and when investments already made in extant infrastructure in the United States and overseas are excluded.
 - This conclusion very likely applies to other equipment-intensive units such as combat aviation brigades or air defense units.
- In terms of diplomatic or political-military factors, forward stationing is preferred by American allies overseas over rotational deployments. Allies perceive forward-stationed forces as a sign of a stronger, more enduring commitment from the United States.
 - The material benefits that accrue to host nations often mitigate the downsides associated with American military presence, such as increased noise levels.

- From a family readiness perspective, there is strong anecdotal evidence indicating both families and Soldiers are dissatisfied with the shift to a U.S.-stationed force.
 - Soldiers and families perceive they are being asked to take on many of the same hardships as for a wartime rotation, but without the moral and material rewards of a combat tour.
 - This strong anecdotal evidence appears to be reflected by lower reenlistment rates for some rotationally deployed units during the 12 months following their rotations to Europe or South Korea. However, it is premature to label this a causal relationship.
- In terms of unit training readiness, rotationally deployed units arrive in theater at a higher level of readiness for decisive action, and their very high operations tempo (OPTEMPO) allows them to maintain that level of readiness throughout their 9 to 10-month deployment. This is appealing to some senior U.S. commanders on the ground in Europe and Korea, who contend that the higher level of activity while in theater bolsters assurance and deterrence. Especially in the case of Korea, rotational deployments have brought a higher degree of stability, reducing the personnel churn that broke up crews and small teams.
 - However, it is highly unlikely that America's adversaries or its allies recognize or care about the differences between an active duty armored brigade combat team (ABCT) that has just conducted a National Training Center (NTC) rotation and one that has not.
 - Moreover, the training readiness advantages of a rotationally deployed unit are balanced out by the significantly higher manning rates of forward-stationed units and the fact that forward-stationed units typically are more knowledgeable of foreign

culture, military units, geography, political leaders, and military counterparts. Forward stationing yields more interoperable, culturally proficient forces.

The DoD has begun to recognize it needs to restore balance to the Army's overseas force posture—the DoD has earmarked additional force structure for forward stationing in Europe, as part of an increase in end strength authorized by the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Nonetheless, compelling evidence as presented in this study points to the conclusion that the DoD can more effectively and efficiently deter and assure through an increase in Army forward stationing beyond that which exists today.

Along these lines, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. To minimize the negative morale associated with 9 to 10-month heel-to-toe rotational deployments that lack the same moral and material benefits of a combat tour, the Army should end such rotations and instead conduct shorter-term, periodic, but regular rotations to South Korea and Europe. The Pacific Pathways initiative may provide a useful model.
2. To minimize recurring fiscal costs, the United States should forward station in Europe and South Korea heavy and/or equipment-intensive units, instead of rotationally deploying them.
3. To maximize the advantages of tactical, operational, and strategic interoperability that come with forward stationing, the United States should forward station those units that require the greatest depth of knowledge of local rules, regulations, customs, terrain, airspace, and/or counterpart units and officials.
4. In the case of Europe, the Army should forward station, for example, an ABCT as well as combat aviation, air defense, and division-level command and control units and related enablers in order to achieve sustainable deterrence and assurance.

5. U.S. forces forward-stationed in Poland—in whole, or in part, through split-basing—would provide greater assurance to Eastern Europe and more effectively deter aggression than rotational forces. Therefore, notwithstanding the restrictions imposed by the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) Russia Founding Act and taking into consideration the significant changes in Russian foreign policy, security strategy, and force posture over the 2 decades since the signing of the Act, the DoD should pursue a policy of forward stationing additional force structure in Poland. Doing so would produce greater assurance and deterrence effects relative to stationing in Western Europe; and the Polish Government has evinced a willingness to share some of the costs of construction and base operations.
6. If forward stationing of additional, appropriate force structure cannot be achieved in Poland, forward stationing in Germany is a cost-effective alternative that would bolster assurance and deterrence through the return of armor, combat aviation, fires, command and control, and other critical enablers to Central Europe.
 - However, in this situation—and in order to control fiscal costs and negative impacts on morale—the United States should end the heel-to-toe armor presence across Eastern Europe provided by continually rotating forces from the continental United States.
 - Instead, the United States should continue to maintain heel-to-toe presence of a battalion-sized unit—sourced from forward-stationed armored, Stryker, and other forces—in Poland under NATO’s enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) initiative.
 - The constant presence of U.S.-sourced armored rotational forces elsewhere across Eastern Europe is very appealing to some field commanders, largely because of high unit training readiness and high OPTEMPO. However, this study suggests that given the array of costs and benefits associated with long duration, continuous rotational deployments, the United States could maintain adequate assurance and deterrence more effectively and efficiently by relying on occasional, short-term deployments across Eastern Europe of armor and other capabilities sourced from units forward-stationed in Europe and occasionally augmented by other short-term deployments of lighter units sourced from the United States.
7. In the case of Korea, the Army should return to a forward-stationed ABCT, and it should maintain combat aviation, air defense, and division-level command and control units and related enablers there. With the completion of construction at Camp Humphreys, the Army should also normalize tours for the ABCT and as many other units as possible, to reduce personnel churn and to reinforce the strong U.S. commitment to South Korean defense.
8. When periodic, shorter-term rotational deployments are necessary in Europe or northeast Asia, the DoD and the Army should rely on infantry brigade combat team (IBCT) or Stryker brigade combat team (SBCT) units.
9. The DoD should try to increase Army forward stationing through growth in Army end strength rather than through relocating a unit that is already stationed in the United States.
 - When the executive branch leads forcefully on these issues, it nearly always overcomes Congressional resistance, even when relocating an extant unit from a U.S. facility to an overseas location, based on historical precedent.
 - In any case, the DoD will need to achieve a strong interagency consensus on the importance of increased forward presence, and it will need to

continually inform Congress of the benefits in terms of morale and family readiness, fiscal cost, diplomacy, and interoperability.

Regardless of the specific overseas force posture adopted by the United States or the particular blend of rotationally deployed forces and forward-stationed forces ultimately arrayed in Europe and South Korea, the Army and the DoD must engage in a careful study of the alternatives. Analysis must precede conclusions, not the other way around. Recent history has shown that to do otherwise, for example, in order to achieve short-term objectives or fulfill myopic political imperatives, can waste taxpayer money and strategically disadvantage the United States.

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