

## Landpower and American Credibility

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**ABSTRACT:** The US Army is under pressure. If trends persist, it will soon shrink to its smallest size in nearly 70 years. While there are sound arguments for the current drawdown, reasonable policies can still yield unintended consequences. In particular, we argue American landpower helps make America's conventional and nuclear security guarantees credible. Since these guarantees stabilize alliances, deter aggression, and curb nuclear proliferation, landpower's relative decline could have serious implications for the broader security situation of the United States.

The US Army is under pressure. Shifting strategic priorities, especially the rebalance to East Asia, necessarily emphasize naval and air power.<sup>1</sup> Budget constraints make it tempting to substitute manpower with technology.<sup>2</sup> Domestically, Americans have little appetite for putting “boots on the ground” after years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Beyond geography, economics and politics, an even more potent threat looms: many strategists believe precision weapons are revolutionizing warfare in ways that diminish landpower's usefulness.<sup>3</sup> Although armies have often been the most important source of military power, because they alone have the ability to defend, conquer, and occupy territory, precision weapons threaten to turn that capability into a liability.<sup>4</sup> As the argument goes, on future battlefields, slow-moving armor, artillery, and infantry units will have nowhere to hide as precision-guided munitions (PGMs) rain down upon them.

American defense planners have responded to these trends by shifting resources away from the Army.<sup>5</sup> There are certainly sound arguments

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1 See Aaron L. Friedberg, *Beyond Air-Sea Battle: The Debate Over US Military Strategy in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2014); Andrew Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, February 19, 2010); Andrew Krepinevich, *Maritime Competition in a Mature Precision-Strike Regime* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2014); T.X. Hammes, “Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict,” *Strategic Forum*, no. 278 (June 2012): 1-14; and Sean Mirski, “Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013): 385-421.

2 Robert O. Work and Shawn Brimley, *20YY: Preparing for War in the Robotic Age* (Washington, DC: Center for New American Security, January 2014).

3 On how PGMs would alter warfare, see Thomas Mahnken, “Weapons: The Growth and Spread of the Precision-Strike Regime,” *Daedalus* 140, no. 3 (2011): 45-57. For an alternative view, see Stephen D. Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

4 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2001): 83-137.

5 By fiscal year 2018 the active-duty Army will complete its planned end-strength reduction from 565,000 to 450,000 soldiers. “Army Announces Force Structure, Stationing Decision,” *Department of Defense News*, July 9, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/612623>. The Army National Guard's end-strength is set to decrease by 15,000 by 2017. “Army Guard to see reductions, changes in personnel and force structure,” *National Guard Bureau*, November 6, 2015, <http://www.nationalguard.mil/News/ArticleView/tabid/5563/Article/627489/army-guard-to-see-reductions-changes-in-personnel-and-force-structure.aspx>.

behind the current drawdown, including the Asia-Pacific Rebalance and a strong aversion to large-scale counterinsurgency. Nevertheless, even reasonable policy decisions can sometimes yield unintended consequences. Specifically, we argue as geopolitical priorities, technological advances, and budgetary constraints undercut American landpower, allies and adversaries may increasingly question America's conventional and nuclear security guarantees. Since these guarantees stabilize alliances, curb nuclear proliferation, resolve security dilemmas, and deter aggression, landpower's relative decline could have serious implications for the broader security situation of the United States.

We proceed as follows. We first explain why landpower makes American threats and promises more believable. It does so in two ways. The first is well understood: ground troops signal the United States has "skin in the game." However, strategists have largely overlooked our second observation: American troops reassure allies because allies think American troops can punish, compel, and ultimately defeat an undeterred adversary.<sup>6</sup> Put simply, forward deployed soldiers and marines are more than just trip-wires and hostages. Allies do not have faith in American commitments because American troops might die; they have faith because American troops can kill and win. If deterrence and assurance were simply about having "skin in the game," America could signal its commitment on the cheap by deploying unarmed conscripts.<sup>7</sup>

We also identify three policy recommendations that flow from our analysis. First, the United States should halt further cuts to Army force structure. Our analysis suggests the United States must retain a sizable forward-based presence in Europe and East Asia. Although budget cuts make it tempting to replace forward-based troops with rotational training and prepositioned equipment, attempts to reassure allies "on the cheap" are unlikely to work in a world where precision and anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) threats make it hard to introduce ground forces once the shooting has begun. Moreover, events in Iraq and Syria demonstrate the United States must retain its ability to wage counterinsurgency operations despite its desire to avoid them.<sup>8</sup> Second, the Joint Force must prove to American allies it has a doctrine that allows it to seize and hold ground in an A2AD threat environment. It is not yet obvious that the United States can reliably introduce and resupply ground forces against a first-rate opponent with robust A2AD capabilities. Third, the Army must similarly develop a viable war-fighting doctrine and associated tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) to operate in a PGM-dominated environment. Incremental adaptation might suffice to keep American landpower relevant, but wholesale innovation may prove necessary.

### The Challenges of Making Security Guarantees

Security guarantees, including multilateral alliances like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and bilateral defense treaties (e.g., Japan),

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<sup>6</sup> US Army Training and Doctrine Command, *The US Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World* (Fort Eustis, VA: US Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2014): 16.

<sup>7</sup> Though the United States did intentionally let families live with forward deployed troops during the Cold War to enhance the tripwire effect of those forces, the government did not deploy families without troops. It invested heavily to ensure those troops were well trained and well equipped.

<sup>8</sup> Francis G. Hoffman, "What the QDR Ought to Say about Landpower," *Parameters* 43, no 4 (Winter 2013-14): 7-14.

enhance American security.<sup>9</sup> They allow the United States to generate more power by leveraging the capabilities of like-minded partners than it could on its own. They deter conflict by threatening to bring combined power to bear on a potential adversary if it threatens an ally. For deterrence to work, an adversary must believe undertaking a certain action will result in a penalty that exceeds any possible gain.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, security guarantees moderate tensions by assuring allies they do not need to pursue nuclear weapons or engage in risky behaviors to improve their security. Finally, they resolve security dilemmas between American allies and their local adversaries.<sup>11</sup> Security dilemmas occur when one state tries to make itself more secure, inadvertently making other states feel less secure in the process.<sup>12</sup> For example, suppose Japan were to develop nuclear weapons to deter China. If China misreads Japanese intentions, it might grow alarmed and respond by adopting a more aggressive posture. The result could be a destabilizing arms race. Security guarantees prevent such dynamics from unfolding.

American security guarantees only work when allies and adversaries believe them. Unfortunately, the nature of international politics is such that states have difficulty trusting one another, especially when security and survival are at stake.<sup>13</sup> Although the United States can promise to intervene on an ally's behalf in a crisis, the ally knows no international court, police force, or coalition has enough power to force the United States to fulfill its pledges. Especially because it is so powerful, the United States always has the option to renege if it changes its mind.<sup>14</sup> For example, the US president might decide not to defend an ally if an imminent war appears more costly than the United States anticipated when it entered into the alliance. As Taiwan discovered in the 1970s, the United States can unilaterally terminate formal treaties when its cost-benefit calculus changes.

The degree to which other states see the United States as a credible ally or adversary depends on how they answer two questions. First, do they think the United States is *willing* to do what it says it will do, especially in a crisis situation? Second, is the United States *able* to do what it says it will do? The less an ally or an adversary trusts American willingness or ability, the less it will believe American security guarantees.

These questions are important because the United States becomes less secure when its allies and adversaries start to question its credibility. All things equal, the more an ally worries the United States will renege in a crisis, the more likely it is that the ally will prepare as though it will have to go it alone in a conflict.<sup>15</sup> Arms build-ups, offensive posturing,

9 Barack Obama, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: The White House, February 2015), 6.

10 Richard Ned Lebow, "Deterrence and Reassurance: Lessons from the Cold War," *Global Dialogue* 4, no. 2 (2000): 119-120. Emphasis in original.

11 Thomas J. Christensen, "China, the US-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East," in *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific*, ed. G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastundono (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), 25-26.

12 Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 186.

13 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

14 Reneging is never costless, but it can be less costly than fulfilling a promise that leads to war.

15 Loose commitments provoke abandonment fears. See Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

and nuclear weapons acquisition are all possible behaviors. The same logic holds for potential adversaries. They also know the United States can shirk from or renege on its guarantees. The more a potential adversary doubts American credibility, the less it will trust American efforts to restrain allies and American threats to intervene or retaliate. In both cases, the lack of credibility can encourage aggressive behavior.<sup>16</sup>

Making credible conventional security guarantees is difficult, but making believable nuclear security guarantees is even trickier. The United States has long promised to use nuclear weapons to defend its most important allies. This strategy of extended nuclear deterrence serves two purposes. It deters nuclear-armed adversaries (as well as those with massive, local conventional advantages) from blackmailing our allies.<sup>17</sup> It also helps to limit nuclear proliferation by convincing allies that acquiring their own nuclear arsenals is unnecessary.<sup>18</sup>

Yet promises to use nuclear weapons must entail ambiguity.<sup>19</sup> Conventional alliance treaties can be explicit about the conditions under which the United States will militarily support an ally. With nuclear security guarantees, the United States cannot draw such clear trigger lines. It must keep adversaries uncertain of its threshold for using nuclear weapons. Otherwise, adversaries can launch attacks against the ally knowing the United States will prefer to stay neutral so as not to risk nuclear war. Unfortunately, the ambiguity that keeps adversaries off-guard does the same to allies. And the more an ally fears the United States might not use nuclear weapons on its behalf, the more likely the ally will try to acquire its own nuclear arsenal.

### **How Landpower Helps Generate Credibility**

Landpower—particularly forward-deployed landpower—helps American security guarantees appear more credible. It shapes how other states perceive America's willingness and ability to implement its promises and threats.

To clarify, the benefits of landpower we describe below exist when the overriding political objective is to defend an ally from external aggression. These benefits might not exist if the goal is to support a domestically unpopular regime face its internal enemies. In such cases, landpower could become a liability if its presence can provoke resentment from the local population and become a target for counterinsurgency.

#### *American Willingness*

Strategists and international security scholars have long understood that putting ground troops on an ally's territory is one of the most

16 On how past actions shape credibility and thus crisis negotiations, see Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics," *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (2015): 473-495.

17 Paul Huth, "Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War," *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 (1988): 423-443.

18 Dan Reiter, "Security Commitments and Nuclear Proliferation," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 14, no. 1 (2014): 61-80. See also Philipp C. Bleek and Eric B. Lorber, "Security Guarantees and Allied Nuclear Proliferation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 3 (2014): 429-454.

19 Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960): Chapter 8. Mira Rapp-Hooper, *Absolute Alliances: Extended Deterrence in International Politics*, PhD Dissertation (Columbia: Columbia University, 2014), Chapter 1.

effective ways the United States can make itself look like a willing partner.<sup>20</sup> Forward-based troops deployed in areas of vital interest do three things. First, they are a tangible indicator of American willingness to fight. Allies and adversaries can observe troop deployments and track troop levels. Ground troops are also expensive to garrison overseas. That the United States bears many of these costs offers further evidence it is serious about its commitments.

Second, forward-based ground troops demonstrate the United States has “skin in the game.” They soothe fears the United States will abandon its ally in a crisis by intertwining American lives with allied interests. When ground troops are on allied soil, even a small conflict where key American interests are at stake could kill Americans. Allies and adversaries know the loss of American life will trigger calls for retribution, making it hard for American leaders to retreat. Accordingly, strategists argue ground troops are one of the most important ways the United States can make its promise to use nuclear weapons more credible.<sup>21</sup>

Third, basing troops overseas also makes it more difficult to stay neutral in a crisis because ground troops are not easy to withdraw. Ships and aircraft can sail and fly away on short notice, but it takes considerable time and money to re-deploy thousands of ground troops. More importantly, extracting ground troops during a crisis entails serious reputational costs. Thomas Schelling captured this logic when discussing American troops in West Berlin:

..[t]he reason we got committed to Berlin, and stayed committed, is that if we let the Soviets scare us out of Berlin we would lose face with the Soviet (and communist Chinese) leaders. It would be bad enough to have Europeans, Latin Americans, and Asians think that we are immoral or cowardly. It would be far worse to lose our reputation with the Soviets.<sup>22</sup>

Recent scholarship supports these arguments, demonstrating that troop deployments discourage the allies who host them from acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, some states have responded to troop withdrawals by trying to acquire nuclear weapons.<sup>24</sup> Historians have shown South Korea began its nuclear program shortly after President Richard Nixon withdrew the 7th US Infantry Division from the Korean

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20 For a similar argument on landpower's benefits for deterrence, see John R. Deni, “Strategic Landpower in the Indo-Asia-Pacific,” *Parameters* 43, no. 3 (Autumn 2013): 77-86.

21 Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966 [2008]), 55.

22 Ibid.

23 Major and unforeseen troop withdrawals make affected allies more likely to consider at least nuclear weapons acquisition. See Alexander Lanoszka, *Protection States Trust?: Major Power Patronage, Nuclear Behavior, and Alliance Dynamics*, PhD Dissertation (Princeton: Princeton University, 2014). Reiter, “Security Commitments.” On alliances and nuclear proliferation, see Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century: China, Britain, France, and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Proliferation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); Bleek and Lorber, “Security Guarantees”; and Nuno P. Monteiro and Alexandre Debs, “The Strategic Logic of Nuclear Proliferation,” *International Security*, 39, no. 2 (2014): 7-51.

24 Lanoszka, “Protection States Trust?”

peninsula.<sup>25</sup> Even West Germany, amid indications the United States was going to reduce its military presence in Western Europe, entered into a trilateral initiative with France and Italy to develop nuclear weapons.<sup>26</sup> In both cases, troop redeployments signaled the United States was no longer heeding the security interests of those allies who still confronted more powerful adversaries.

### *American Ability*

Allies and adversaries must also believe the United States can win on the battlefield if deterrence is to work.<sup>27</sup> Landpower is a crucial tool for demonstrating America's ability to prevail. Specifically, when the United States puts well-trained and well-equipped ground troops on an ally's territory, it substantially improves that ally's ability to defeat an invasion or seize an adversary's territory. Much of this ability derives from five capabilities unique to landpower.

First, ground forces are more survivable than air and sea forces. When employed correctly, ground troops can disperse, entrench, and camouflage.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, they are notoriously hard to find and eradicate, even when an invader has precision weapons—a lesson the United States repeatedly learned in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Second, ground forces have relatively more staying power than air and sea forces. Aircraft and ships must routinely stop fighting and return to a safe harbor or airfield for fuel and maintenance.<sup>29</sup> Though ground units also require logistical support, they can operate at the limits of human endurance and can resupply while engaged in combat.

Third, landpower has a powerful psychological effect on invaders and defenders. Invaders know ground forces are inherently difficult to find and destroy. When defending ground troops are well trained and well equipped, attacking troops know they will suffer heavier casualties. Similarly, the presence of well-trained and well-equipped ground troops can stiffen the resolve of a defender's political leaders. As long

25 Lyong Choi, "The First Nuclear Crisis on the Korean Peninsula, 1975-1976," *Cold War History* 14, no. 1 (2014): 71-90. See also Sung Gol Hong, "The Search for Deterrence: Park's Nuclear Option," in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, eds. Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011) and Seung-Young Kim, "Security, Nationalism, and the Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons and Missiles: The South Korean Case, 1970-82," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 12, no. 4 (2001): 53-80.

26 Leopoldo Nuti, "The F-I-G Story Revisited," *Storia delle Relazioni Internazionali* 13, no. 1 (1998): 69-100. Historian Hubert Zimmermann writes that Adenauer saw American troops as "the fundamental symbol of the American commitment to Europe." *Idem, Money and Security: Troops, Monetary Policy, and West Germany's Relations with the United States and Britain, 1950-1971* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 90. The United States repeatedly threatened troop withdrawals from West Germany during the 1960s, thereby complicating efforts to get West Germany to make international commitments not to acquire nuclear weapons. For one view of these diplomatic travails, see Gene Gerzhoy, "Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint: How the United States Thwarted West Germany's Nuclear Ambitions," *International Security* 39, no. 4 (2015): 91-129.

27 Steven Metz, "Has the United States Lost the Ability to Fight a Major War?" *Parameters* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 7-12.

28 Biddle, *Military Power*, 28-51.

29 On the fuel and armament limitations of modern American warships, see Charles C. Swicker, "Theater Ballistic Missile Defense From the Sea: Issues for the Maritime Component Commander," *The Newport Papers*, no. 14 (August 1998): 30-35. For a similar analysis of drones and fighter aircraft, see Martin Edmonds, "Air power and Taiwan's security," in Martin Edmonds and Michael Tsai, eds., *Taiwan's Security and Air Power: Taiwan's Defense Against the Air Threat from Mainland China* (London, UK: Routledge, 2004): 15.

as a defender still has forces on the ground, it has the means to resist occupation and the total loss of sovereignty.

Fourth, only landpower can hold and control territory. Although aircraft, ships, missiles, and satellites can destroy targets on the ground and deny access to an area, they cannot subsequently exercise control. Only ground troops can do so and, more importantly, subsequently pacify hostile populations.<sup>30</sup> At a minimum, landpower is a crucial complement to air and sea power. The presence of coalition ground defenses means invaders must deploy ground troops of its own. These invading ground troops will then be vulnerable to interdiction and destruction by coalition air and sea forces, especially as they are transported into theater. Collectively, forward-based American ground troops make it more costly to invade an American ally, deterring invasion *ex ante* and lowering its chances of success *ex post*.

Finally, given its ability to seize and control territory, landpower allows the United States to threaten an adversary and its overseas holdings with invasion. By holding an adversary's territory at risk, landpower is therefore an important tool for preventing adversaries from gaining a competitive advantage. In peacetime, the threat of invasion compels adversaries to invest in defensive measures, consuming resources that could otherwise be spent on offensive capabilities.<sup>31</sup> In wartime, the threat of an American retaliatory campaign means adversaries must hold troops and equipment in reserve.

## Recommendations for US Defense Policy

Three policy considerations flow from our analysis.

### 1) *Maintain the Ability to Attack On Land*

Credible security guarantees depend on allies and adversaries believing that American ground forces can fight and win on the ground in a theater dominated by precision and A2AD weapons. To clarify why precision and A2AD weapons threaten landpower, consider how long-range precision weapons could neutralize or disrupt forward-based troops in the earliest stages of a conflict. Command and control nodes, motor pools, troop barracks, supply dumps, and large combat formations are especially vulnerable to such strikes. By pre-emptively hitting these centers of gravity, an adversary can disorganize, disorient and demoralize a coalition ground force before reinforcements arrive. Even if forward-based ground troops withstand an initial precision strike, A2AD weapons will make it harder to reinforce and resupply them. Anti-access weapons can prevent aircraft carriers, troop transports, and maritime prepositioned forces from getting close enough to launch airstrikes, seize beachheads, or offload gear. Meanwhile, area-denial weapons make it harder to establish reasonably safe aerial and seaports of disembarkation and allow adversaries to harass and attrite resupply convoys.<sup>32</sup>

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30 We acknowledge the difficulties in pacifying a hostile population. Our point is simply that human ground troops are far more effective at the difficult task of providing security and building trust than aircraft, ships and remote-controlled vehicles.

31 An adversary can use defensive weapons for offensive purposes. Nevertheless, the doctrinal and training requirements for attacking and defending are different.

32 See footnote 1 for sources that describe the A2AD challenge facing the United States.

Several intriguing proposals address the challenges raised by precision and A2AD weapons. John Gordon IV and John Matsumura suggest that ground troops can maintain local security and missile defense for air bases and naval resupply points. They can also support maneuver operations by using attack helicopters and drones to protect ships; and long-range rockets to suppress enemy air defenses.<sup>33</sup> Andrew Krepinevich envisions an even more important role for landpower in East Asia. He wants to build a chain of linked coastal defenses throughout the so-called First Island Chain, making A2AD China's problem. Ground troops would operate early warning detection networks; lay coastal mines; and fire long-range torpedoes, short-range missile interceptors, and anti-ship cruise missiles. In the event of an invasion, American ground troops could serve as the backbone for allied defenders.<sup>34</sup>

These ideas suggest fascinating options for keeping landpower viable on future battlefields. Nevertheless, they primarily articulate a defensive role for landpower. American forces must still be capable of undertaking offensive operations around the world. Having the ability to attack on land does four things. First, it allows the United States to deter through the threat of punishment. Second, it prevents adversaries from gaining a competitive advantage by focusing resources on offensive measures. Third, it provides a hedge against salami slicing and other *fait accompli* strategies that adversaries might otherwise be tempted to use. Fourth, as Krepinevich points out, defensive operations in an A2AD environment may still require the United States to seize peripheral territory to preempt an adversary and to draw it out of its bastion.

## 2) *Allies are Hard to Reassure "On the Cheap"*

Budget constraints and shifting strategic priorities have caused the United States to reduce drastically its ground forces at home and abroad. The US Army's share of the defense budget is now at its lowest level in 15 years. If current trends persist, the Army's budget share will shrink to pre-Vietnam War levels.<sup>35</sup> Its active duty end-strength will drop to 450,000 soldiers by fiscal year 2018, representing the smallest active duty Army in nearly seven decades.<sup>36</sup>

To maintain its overseas commitments in the face of these significant reductions, the Army has necessarily started to rely on rotational forces and prepositioned gear.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, such practices may be less likely to reassure allies or deter adversaries. Both know it is easier, politically and logistically, to halt a rotational program than it is to withdraw permanently based forces. In other words, rotational forces are a less costly signal than overseas bases. To the degree allies and adversaries believe it is now easier for US leaders to renege in a crisis, American credibility will decline. Prepositioned-gear programs are even less likely to assure or deter. While allies and adversaries know having

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33 John Gordon and John Matsumura, *The Army's Role in Overcoming Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenges* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013), 21-32.

34 Andrew Krepinevich, "How to Deter China: The Case for Archipelagic Defense," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 2 (March/April 2015): 78-86.

35 Michael O'Hanlon, *The Future of Land Warfare* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2015), 23.

36 See footnote 5 for sources on these planned reductions.

37 Kimberly Field, James Learmont and Jason Charland, "Regionally Aligned Forces: Business Not as Usual," *Parameters* 33, no. 3 (Autumn 2013): 55-63; Julian Barnes, "US Army Chief Plans Steps to Mitigate Reduction of American Forces in Europe," *Wall Street Journal*, July 10, 2015.



gear in theater will make it easier to deploy American ground forces in a crisis, they also know prepositioned-gear does not make it more likely that the United States will intervene as promised. In some respects, prepositioned-gear may even be tantamount to cheap talk in the minds of allies and adversaries. Such perceptions are especially likely if the United States prepositions antiquated or poorly maintained equipment. A2AD threats make it even harder for the United States to assure or deter with prepositioned-gear. Given the degree to which the United States has allowed its forcible entry capability to atrophy, there is no guarantee US ground troops will be able to arrive in theater, link up with their prepositioned equipment and deploy into combat formations without absorbing unacceptable casualties.

The United States should therefore reevaluate its decision to cut deeply into Army force structure. Although we are not in a position to specify the Army's ideal size, any end-strength that forces Army leaders to substitute rotational and regionally aligned forces for permanently based units should be considered too small. Given such considerations, an end-strength of approximately 500,000 active-duty soldiers seems more appropriate given the Army's strategic requirements.<sup>38</sup> It should likewise consider maintaining more forward-based troops in Europe than might seem strictly justified by the so-called "pivot to Asia." We admit to the difficulty of pursuing this course of action while the 2011 Budget Control Act (BCA) remains in effect. Increased reliance on Total Force may be one way to minimize the inevitable opportunity cost of maintaining a larger ground force.

### 3) Prepare for a Major Shift in Ground Doctrine

Maintaining the ability to attack on land in the face of precision and A2AD weapons will require profound changes to existing doctrine. Operational concepts, including the Joint Operational Access Concept and the Joint Concept for Entry Operations, are critical steps in the right direction because they identify a framework for innovation.<sup>39</sup> However, history suggests when it comes to doctrinal change, the devil is in the details. History offers an example in the nineteenth-century firepower revolution, which also made it easier to defend than attack. Europe's armies nearly annihilated themselves trying to figure out how to attack during the First World War. The difference between success and failure on the Western Front turned at least as much on tactics, techniques, and procedures as it did on broad operational concepts.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, (although it is important to spend on mobility/counter-mobility assets) research and development in the areas of forcible entry from air, space, and sea, distributed land operations, and tactical experimentation must remain a priority.

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38 John Evans, *Getting it Right: Determining the Optimal Active Component End Strength of the All-Volunteer Army to Meet the Demands of the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Brookings, June 2015).

39 US Department of Defense, *Joint Operational Access Concept* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, January 17, 2012); US Department of Defense, *Joint Concept for Entry Operations* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, April 7, 2014).

40 Michael Hunzeker, *Perfecting War: The Organizational Sources of Doctrinal Innovation*, PhD Dissertation (Princeton: Princeton University, 2013), Chapters 4-7.

## Conclusion

The rebalance to Asia, the drawdown in Afghanistan, war weariness at home, and the BCA have led American defense planners to prioritize sea and air power over landpower. Such shifts are sensible, but they should not obscure the important relationship between landpower and American credibility. Landpower—especially in the form of forward deployed ground troops—helps make American security guarantees believable. Ground troops have this effect because they symbolize willingness (by acting as a tripwire) *and* possess ability (by being effective in combat). Precision weapons and A2AD assets target landpower capabilities because the former lets adversaries destroy forward-based troops from afar while the latter makes it difficult to reinforce them. These capabilities are as much a threat to landpower in Europe as they are in East Asia and the Middle East. As allies and adversaries around the world begin to doubt the combat effectiveness of American ground troops, they are more likely to find American credibility suspect. For these reasons, the effectiveness of American landpower must be assured.

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