



# Executive Summary

Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press



**SENIOR CONFERENCE 50, THE ARMY WE NEED:  
THE ROLE OF LANDPOWER IN AN UNCERTAIN STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT,  
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The United States Military Academy (USMA) Senior Conference is run annually by the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy on behalf of the Superintendent. This event allows distinguished representatives from the private sector, government, academia, the think-tank community, and the joint military services to discuss important national security topics. Senior Conference 2014, the 50th iteration of this event, explored emerging trends and their implications for the Army's strategic contribution to national security. As policymakers strive to rebalance U.S. national security investments in a fiscally constrained environment, debates about the future roles and missions of the armed services have intensified. Though many questions related to the future role of military power remain unsettled, the Army will undoubtedly play an important role in answering them.

Several key themes emerged from the conference. First, the nation currently struggles to achieve a strategic consensus on the source and severity of future threats. This struggle impedes the Army's ability to prioritize and prepare its forces. In the absence of strategic consensus, the Army is less able to help develop and shape its future forces. Moreover, an uncertain political context, influenced by the public's increasing unwillingness to commit troops, partisan gridlock, and persistent austerity, appears to favor materiel over personnel. Given this environment, it is not surprising that the Army has difficulty conveying its value in national security policy to policymakers and the public.

Second, internal debates over the definition of readiness and the best way to achieve it—along with a disagreement as to the Army's mission—impedes the Army's ability to manage its portfolio of capabilities as it downsizes. Disagreement as to the Army's mission makes it difficult to craft a cohesive and coherent narrative of its utility to outside constituencies, including policymakers. In addition, an underlying fear exists about bureaucratic dominance in decisionmaking related to downsizing. Better integration between the operational and generating force combined with talent management techniques can prevent these concerns from being actualized.

Finally, conference participants found that this lack of consistent messaging creates fundamental disconnects resulting in planning challenges. The first concern is whether technology serves to replace personnel or complement them. Second, there is disagreement about the ability of the Army to retract and then expand when needed. While some point to the benefits of potential long-term budgetary savings, others raise the short-term costs of casualties and materiel that could be incurred by utilizing forces that are trained too quickly. Finally, there is a significant tension concerning the role of the budget. While senior leaders should be cognizant of the budget as a restriction on Army spending, the budget should not be the driving factor in planning and discussions on future capabilities.

The Army can work to ameliorate these concerns. First, by adopting a cohesive and coherent message, the Army can highlight its role as the nation's national

security insurance policy. The Army's message to policymakers and the public should emphasize its role in risk management and clearly articulate tradeoffs when thinking through risks and budgets. In doing this, the Army can maintain a consistent narrative that war is an enduring, strategic, human interaction. Landpower is, and will always be, the dominant domain within war. By enhancing officer and senior leader engagement with congress, the Army can also improve dissemination of the narrative's twin themes of the nation's insurance policy and the centrality of Landpower. A strong emphasis on the value of fostering deep relationships with members of Congress and staffers will provide the building blocks for maintenance of a consistent discussion of the message and the role the Army plays in national security. In focusing on its message, the Army can work to debunk the expansion myth. While it is easy to downsize personnel, those same forces cannot be dismantled and rebuilt without significant risk. Trust, skills, and tactics take years to earn, learn, and understand. Even if the Army does shrink, it can still continue implementation of Talent Management Practices to place the right people in the right jobs for extended periods of time, which increases both efficiency and effectiveness.

The Army faces a daunting task. With the current zeitgeist favoring limited use of "boots on the ground" with increasing emphasis on technology, the Army has constituencies that would like to see a limited standing Army that can rapidly expand its land forces when needed. The uncertain strategic environment requires an investment in human

capital that produces an educated, trained, and diverse workforce, and developing this takes time. As it navigates debates outside the Pentagon about its utility, the Army should seek to understand its own internal conflicts in managing the drawdown. By creating and disseminating a cohesive message, while managing talent during any downsize, the Army can mitigate both the effects on the force and risk to the American populace.

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