

The Case for Forward Deployment

The 50th anniversary of World War II is an apt moment to consider the linkage between U.S. engagement overseas and a stable international system. Three times between 1914 and 1950, neutrality or disengagement led America to major conflict. Then we engaged globally, ultimately winning the Cold War. Now we are entering a new international environment and are wisely following the lessons of history with a national strategy of engagement.

The most critical military aspect of the engagement strategy is forward deployment. Post-Cold War reductions are nearly complete, and we now have about 285,000 personnel (or 17 percent of the active force) stationed overseas. That's down from 510,000 (23 percent) just five years ago.

But we are reminded by two articles in this issue that the debate over forward deployment continues. David Yost (in "The Future of U.S. Overseas Presence") cites an opinion survey that shows about half of America's elite favors maintaining current troop levels in Europe while the general public is far more isolationist. He points out that the Frank amendment of last year would have cut our force levels drastically if Europe declined to greatly increase host nation support payments. In commentary by James Lasswell ("Presence—Do We Stay or Do We Go?")—a response to the new Air Force white paper, *Global Presence*, which appeared in *JFQ*, no. 7 (Spring 1995)—there is a strong case made for a continued naval presence overseas.

This is a debate that, given the history of this century, cannot be allowed to drift. We need a national consensus in favor of continued overseas deployment. But to achieve that consensus we need a clearer understanding of the role of forward deployed forces in the post-Cold War era.

During the Cold War the Armed Forces were deployed overseas as part of containment to deter attack by a known enemy. We relied heavily on rapid reinforcement to defend. Today we still maintain a presence in South Korea and the Persian Gulf for the same purpose. It is better to deter two major regional conflicts than to fight them. Such deployments are easy to justify.

The complex strategic environment for this era, however, requires a better explanation of the overseas deployment of 285,000 Americans in uniform. It is this more complex case that must be made to the public. It rests on the concepts of *reassurance*, *cooperation*, and *crisis response*.

Often even a token presence can serve like a cooling rod in a nuclear power plant. This is particularly true in Asia where a power balance among China, Japan, and the members of ASEAN has yet to be struck. Our roughly 100,000 military personnel sta-

tioned in East Asia stabilize the balance, reassure our friends, and prevent unnecessary regional military buildups. Most Asians recognize this more readily than Americans, which is why they wish us to stay and why Japan is willing to contribute a high level of host nation support. Reassurance also remains important in Europe where most want Germany to retain its non-nuclear status and defensive posture.

In a world of multilateral diplomacy and combined military operations, close cooperation with foreign forces is indispensable. Habits learned in NATO facilitated the establishment of the coalition for Desert Shield/Desert Storm around which the Arab states gathered. This cooperation is not only critical for the success of combined forces on the battlefield, but it also yields diplomatic capital. Bosnia has illustrated the correlation between force presence and influence in the contact group. Cooperation can benefit civil-military relations in transitional societies as the Partnership for Peace has demonstrated. And cooperation yields intelligence assets, such as early warning of terrorist threats against the Panama Canal. Forward deployment is crucial to forging patterns of cooperation without which American influence would rapidly decline.

Forward deployed forces are fundamental to America's ability to react to crises around the world which affect vital interests or humanitarian concerns. In Desert Storm about 95 percent of the airlift came via Europe. A review of 27 operations mounted between March 1991 and October 1994 reveals that more than half were staged from Europe. Some, like Able Sentry, contribute to preventive diplomacy. Without forward staging areas, America would be severely constrained.

Each service struggles with a portion of forward deployment. Many in the Army would prefer to bring home the two heavy divisions in Europe while only retaining a "reception center" infrastructure. There may be a case for replacing armor with more mobile light units. The Navy finds it increasingly difficult to retain a significant presence in the Caribbean, Mediterranean, Atlantic, Pacific, Indian Ocean, and Persian Gulf with a fleet two-thirds the size of a decade ago. As Marine Amphibious Units increasingly provide a mobile presence for crisis management, there do not seem to be enough to go around. Some within the Air Force advocate *virtual* as opposed to physical presence as a major contribution to our military capabilities.

As we assess the significance of deterring regional conflicts, reassuring allies, cooperating in multilateral actions, and responding to crises, the case for forward deployment becomes clear. We are deployed overseas to promote U.S. national interests first and those of our allies second. This should not be a difficult notion to get across to the American people.

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