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# Stretched Thin

## Army Forces for Sustained Operations

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## Summary

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### **The Problem: Supporting Sustained Operational Deployments**

Recent events have seen a growing demand for use of the nation's military forces, both for overseas operations and for homeland security. The increased operational tempo, particularly driven by the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, has led to more frequent and lengthy deployments of units and soldiers across the entire U.S. Army. These in turn have placed increasing stress on the Army as it seeks to preserve its institutional commitments to training its soldiers and units and to maintaining a pool of ready units that can respond rapidly to new contingencies.

This situation confronts the nation with several key questions: Are the Army's active and reserve forces the right size to meet these demands? Does the Army have the right number and types of combat units to sustain high levels of overseas deployments while maintaining ready units for other possible contingencies? And how much does the rapid rotation of deployments stretch the Army's units and soldiers? The current report endeavors to address these questions and to examine alternative ways in which the Army might respond to current and future demands on its forces.

## Effects of Deployments on Unit and Force Readiness

Our analytic strategy for addressing these questions focuses on large combat formations, or brigade combat teams (BCTs),<sup>1</sup> and involves examining a broad range of operational requirements. We stipulate a steady-state requirement for sustained deployments and compare that requirement with the supply of brigades that can be provided from the Army's active component (AC) and reserve component (RC) (Army National Guard), given alternative policies for utilizing the forces. From that analysis we derive two key outcome measures that describe critical aspects of the Army's ability to fulfill its missions: time at home<sup>2</sup> between deployments for AC BCTs and the number of "ready" AC BCTs. Unit time at home is important because it has wide ramifications for Army capabilities and the welfare of soldiers, including potentially recruitment and retention.<sup>3</sup> The number of ready units offers a metric for assessing the nation's defense posture and the Army's ability to respond rapidly to new contingencies and threats.

Those two outcome measures depend on several factors that may vary simultaneously:

- **Size of the operational requirement:** In our analysis, these ranged from 8 brigades to 20 brigades required for recurring overseas deployments at any given time.
- **Army force size and structure:** We examined both the baseline force (pre-2004) and the Army's planned transformed force

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<sup>1</sup> A BCT typically includes a single maneuver brigade (such as an armor or mechanized infantry brigade) and various combat support and combat service support elements that deploy with it. The specifics vary across different types of brigades, but the nonmaneuver elements commonly include engineers, intelligence, military police, medical, transportation, and other support assets.

<sup>2</sup> For "time at home," the Army is using the term "dwell time." See Preston (2005).

<sup>3</sup> The unit's time at home between deployments is an important factor in determining the amount of time that individual soldiers can spend at home. However, an individual's experience over a career is also influenced by other factors, such as assignments to Korea and to institutional positions. These are examined in Chapter Three.

(expected to be complete by 2007 in the AC and 2010 in the RC).

- **Employment policies:** We analyzed variations in the duration of overseas deployments for both active and reserve forces, the frequency of mobilizations of RC units, and the amount of preparation time that RC units need before deploying.

The aim is to portray outcomes of various policy choices and thereby to assist policymakers in seeking to reduce the stress of sustained operations on the Army's combat forces.

### Using the Active Component Alone

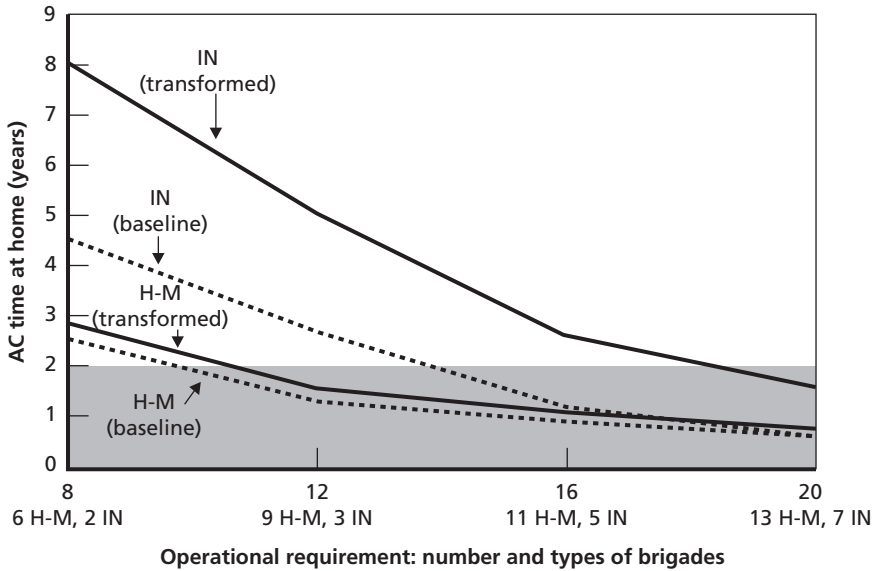
Our initial analysis focused on a base case in which the Army supports its operational demands exclusively by relying on brigades in the AC. As shown in Figure S.1, we defined four cases of operational requirements for recurring overseas deployments (8, 12, 16, and 20 brigades in theater at any time). We also specified the types of heavy, medium (Stryker), and infantry brigades, weighting them toward heavy-medium units, in line with the force mix the Army has sent to Iraq and Afghanistan. Figure S.1 portrays these four cases along with two cases of combat force supply: the baseline (pre-2004) Army force structure of 33 BCTs (32 rotating) and the posttransformation Army force of 43 (41 rotating) modularized brigades, called brigade combat team units of action (BCT-UAs).<sup>4</sup> The figure shows time at home separately for heavy-medium units (labeled H-M) and infantry units (IN).

What emerges from this analysis is that the baseline AC inventory of heavy-medium BCTs is placed under considerable stress when sustained deployment requirements exceed 10 brigades. At larger requirements (12 through 20 brigades), time at home for heavy-medium BCTs is less than two years—a well-established Army goal

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter Two and the appendix for a description of the Army baseline and transformed force structure. We will for simplicity use the term “transformed brigade” for the successor combat brigades in the Army transformation plan.

**Figure S.1**  
**AC Time at Home by Type of Combat Unit for Different Operational Requirement Levels**



RAND MG362-S.1

for refreshing, refitting, and retraining its units between subsequent deployments. The situation for heavy-medium units is only mildly improved by the Army’s plans for transformation.<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, some improvement can be made by permitting units of any type to substitute for one another (e.g., sending a light unit for a heavy requirement). However, as requirements rise above 14 brigades, all types of units have less than the goal of two years time at home. At these high levels of demands, the nation is left with few ready brigades for other potential contingencies.

<sup>5</sup> The goal of two years time at home is achieved for transformed infantry units until the requirement rises above 18 brigades. If, on the other hand, the rotation requirements shifted to emphasize infantry units, the strains on heavy-medium units would decrease. But infantry units would then be increasingly stressed.



### **Adding the Reserve Component to the Deployment Pool**

The above results represent the situation if the Army uses only its AC units. What if it also calls on its RC units? In analyses to address that question, we examined the contribution of National Guard brigades to improving the time at home for AC brigades and the count of Army ready units. We focused on fulfilling a rotational requirement of 16 brigades—the size of the force actually deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan in mid-2004—specifying that 11 of these should be heavy or medium brigades.

The results show that AC time at home for transformed heavy-medium brigades is substantially less than two years, even assuming that the Army deploys its RC forces under a policy that mobilizes them one year out of every six years<sup>6</sup> and even after the posttransformation supply of AC and RC combat units is available for deployment. When we investigated a series of modified RC employment policies, such as more frequent RC mobilizations (e.g., one in four) or reduced RC preparation times (with longer RC deployments), we found these to be somewhat helpful, but insufficient even in combination to bring AC time at home for transformed heavy-medium brigades up to the two-year threshold.

Therefore, to meet a goal of two years AC time at home, the Army would need to take further steps beyond adding its transformed RC brigades to the rotation. One possible step would be to increase the supply of AC and/or RC transformed heavy-medium brigades beyond those currently in the transformation plan—a costly but conceivable solution. Another approach would be to permit flexibility by using different types of units to meet operational requirements. In that case, the nation would have to accept appreciable operational

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<sup>6</sup> Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has issued guidelines that direct the services to plan for using RC forces on a schedule that results in only one year of mobilization out of every six. See a memorandum by the Secretary of Defense, July 2003, followed by a Department of Defense report on *Rebalancing Forces: Easing the Stress on the Guard and Reserve* (2004). The *Army Strategic Planning Guidance* of 2005, however, sets the goal in terms of “deployments”: “one year deployed and five years at home station” for the National Guard, and “one year deployed and four years at home station” for the Army Reserve. This would require a frequency of RC “mobilization” of more than one year in six years.

risk, by assuming that any type of RC unit would be able to accomplish the mission and each of the National Guard brigades would be equal in capability to those in the AC.

## Policy Options and Risks

Based on the above findings, we assessed policy alternatives that the Army could consider to manage intensive deployments and maintain readiness. What emerges is that each of these alternatives involves significant costs and risks. Therefore, we consider a series of future conditions that could emerge and pose questions about how the Army can adapt so that it can meet its immediate operational requirements and sustain its force over the longer term. If it cannot meet all needs under current plans, how could it adapt to improve the situation?

**Suppose, Initially, That Overseas Rotation Requirements Drop Back to Ten Brigades.** With that demand, and assuming that the Army both has the resources to implement its AC and RC transformation plans and can draw on all the National Guard brigades one year in every six years, all types of AC units would have at least two years at home between deployments. The Army would have more than 20 brigades ready for other contingencies, of which at least 11 would be heavy-medium units.

The issue for the nation is whether policymakers are comfortable basing future Army planning on this lower level of overseas rotational requirements. This assumption could be plausible if one views the current requirements in Iraq and Afghanistan as an aberration or something to be endured for a short time now or only periodically in the future.

**Alternatively: What If High Overseas Rotation Requirements Continue for Some Time?** To meet requirements levels in the upper range that we have considered—14 to 20 brigades—the Army would experience serious problems in AC unit readiness and the nation would have few if any ready AC brigades to turn to in a crisis. Transforming the Army into the planned structure of 43 active transformed brigades will help, but transformation is largely in the future,

comes with its own uncertainties, and cannot meet the full demand for rotational forces by itself.

The nation could decide to live with these low levels of ready AC units and training time—if it assumed that the Army will only rarely need to respond quickly to contingencies with large numbers of forces either overseas or at home. In effect, this course means assuming that international or domestic contingencies will not require Army combat brigades to do much beyond supporting overseas rotations.

**What If the Risks Are Too High for the Army to Plan for Low Levels of Contingency Requirements?** As we have described, there are two possible adaptations. The Army could turn to the RC and plan on utilizing them at reasonable rates—e.g., mobilizing all National Guard brigades for one year out of every six years. However, these units can be called only at reasonable intervals, and they can cover only a modest portion of the requirement for overseas forces, even assuming, as the Army does, that all transformed National Guard brigades will be capable of participating in the rotations. Alternatively, the Army could plan to fill rotational requirements based on the assumption that any unit could fulfill the mission. Such flexibility greatly improves the situation, but only if the transformed National Guard brigades are all available to be mobilized one year in every six years and all equally capable of meeting the overseas requirements. Such a course carries operational risk if the theater environment is not benign or missions require armor protection and on-the-ground mobility. To date, the Army has hedged against such risks by deploying forces to Iraq that are predominantly heavy. Moreover, when overseas rotation requirements increase beyond about 17 brigades, AC time at home falls below two years even assuming such flexibility.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, to meet a 20-brigade requirement, some Army planners suggest accepting full flexibility *and* deploying RC brigades for a one-year tour every six years. That would achieve the goal of two years time at home for AC units, but it would require the Army to mobilize the RC brigades for 18 months in every six-year period (equivalent to a mobilization frequency of one in four years).

**What If It Is Too Risky to Assume That Infantry, Medium, and Heavy Units in the AC and RC Can Substitute for One Another in Future Missions?** We have explored two options to respond under those circumstances. One avenue is for the Army to forgo its transformation plans to convert heavy National Guard units to infantry units. This would also require the Army to find the resources to make all these units—including the divisional brigades—equal in readiness to AC brigades. Alternatively, the Army could take an approach that pursues its National Guard transformation plans and keeps RC utilization within current policy constraints but adds heavy force structure to the AC. This could be accomplished either by changing the mix of the units planned in the Army's transformation or adding additional transformed brigades. But this would call for finding billions of dollars well beyond the current Army modularity plan and would take years to achieve.

To decide on an overall approach for the future will require the nation to confront a number of trade-offs in terms of the Army's reliance on the AC and RC, in terms of the risks it is willing to take with the Army's ability to meet different types of future contingencies, in terms of what types of training of Army units will be required for different types of operations, and in terms of what resources are available for transforming the RC and increasing AC force structure. Our analysis suggests that the challenge is profound and that making the trade-offs will not be easy.