



# PROJECT AIR FORCE

- CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
- EDUCATION AND THE ARTS
- ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT
- HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE
- INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRANSPORTATION
- INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
- LAW AND BUSINESS
- NATIONAL SECURITY
- POPULATION AND AGING
- PUBLIC SAFETY
- SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
- TERRORISM AND HOMELAND SECURITY

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis.

This electronic document was made available from [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org) as a public service of the RAND Corporation.

Skip all front matter: [Jump to Page 1](#) ▼

## Support RAND

[Purchase this document](#)

[Browse Reports & Bookstore](#)

[Make a charitable contribution](#)

## For More Information

Visit RAND at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)

Explore [RAND Project AIR FORCE](#)

View [document details](#)

## Limited Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law as indicated in a notice appearing later in this work. This electronic representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only. Unauthorized posting of RAND electronic documents to a non-RAND website is prohibited. RAND electronic documents are protected under copyright law. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of our research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please see [RAND Permissions](#).

This product is part of the RAND Corporation monograph series. RAND monographs present major research findings that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors. All RAND monographs undergo rigorous peer review to ensure high standards for research quality and objectivity.

# U.S. Overseas Military Presence

## What Are the Strategic Choices?

---

Lynn E. Davis, Stacie L. Pettyjohn,  
Melanie W. Sisson, Stephen M. Worman,  
Michael J. McNerney

Prepared for the United States Air Force  
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



RAND

PROJECT AIR FORCE

The research described in this report was sponsored by the United States Air Force under Contract FA7014-06-C-0001. Further information may be obtained from the Strategic Planning Division, Directorate of Plans, Hq USAF.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

U.S. overseas military presence : what are the strategic choices? / Lynn E. Davis ... [et al.].

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8330-7340-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. United States—Armed Forces—Foreign countries. 2. Military bases, American—Foreign countries. 3. United States—Defenses—Planning. 4. National security—United States—Planning. 5. United States—Military policy—Planning. 6. Strategy. I. Davis, Lynn E. (Lynn Etheridge), 1943-

UA26.A2U75 2012

355'.033573—dc23

2012031923

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

**RAND®** is a registered trademark.

© Copyright 2012 RAND Corporation

Permission is given to duplicate this document for personal use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Copies may not be duplicated for commercial purposes. Unauthorized posting of RAND documents to a non-RAND website is prohibited. RAND documents are protected under copyright law. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please visit the RAND permissions page (<http://www.rand.org/publications/permissions.html>).

Published 2012 by the RAND Corporation

1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138

1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050

4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2665

RAND URL: <http://www.rand.org>

To order RAND documents or to obtain additional information, contact

Distribution Services: Telephone: (310) 451-7002;

Fax: (310) 451-6915; Email: [order@rand.org](mailto:order@rand.org)

## Summary

---

Since World War II, the United States has relied on a network of global military bases and forces to provide forward, collective defense against the Soviet Union, to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and to fight terrorism. Today, the international environment has changed, with China asserting itself across East Asia, Iran pursuing an ambitious nuclear program, and al-Qaeda affiliates still presenting threats to Western interests. Domestically, too, the environment is changing as the United States confronts serious economic uncertainties and growing pressures have resulted in reductions in government spending, including spending on defense.

Indeed, a debate is under way as to the future role of America in the world. One aspect of this debate is what the size and characteristics of future U.S. overseas military presence should be, with the Obama administration calling for a global presence that emphasizes the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East, while maintaining defense commitments to Europe.<sup>1</sup> Other voices are calling for bringing most U.S. military forces home.<sup>2</sup> This monograph seeks to inform the overall debate and support future policymakers by introducing a new analytical approach to defining future overseas U.S. military presence.

Our approach begins with U.S. global security interests and then focuses on the specific threats to them in East Asia, Europe, and the

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, January 2012, pp. 1–3.

<sup>2</sup> Senator Carl Levin reportedly said that he will not support closing bases in the United States until bases are closed in Europe (Elisabeth Bumiller and Thom Shanker, “Defense Budget Cuts Would Limit Raises and Close Bases,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2012).

Middle East. It recognizes that policymakers and those in the public debate hold different perspectives on what overseas U.S. military presence is needed. So, we designed global postures that differ in their perspectives, or strategic view, and illustrated them in terms of the necessary U.S. Air Force bases, combat and mobility forces, active-duty personnel, and base operating costs. What emerged from our analyses are the critical strategic choices that policymakers need to address and that the public needs to debate as they consider future overseas U.S. military presence.

The first strategic choice is for the United States to decide whether its overseas military presence can be reduced and diversified because its allies in Europe and Northeast Asia are able, economically and militarily, to assume primary responsibility for their own security. Such a choice could involve, for example, the United States reducing bases and combat forces in the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and South Korea. The remaining permanent U.S. overseas presence would provide the bases and military forces for immediate responses to future threats and thereby reassure U.S. allies and partners. The United States would then have the flexibility to expand its rotational presence across Southeast and Southwest Asia if threats were to increase or if partners were to call for reassurance.

If relying more on U.S. allies seems risky, given their reliance on nonmilitary strategies for responding to potential military threats and the political and economic constraints on their defense spending, the United States would face other strategic choices with respect to its future overseas military presence. One is whether it is time for the United States to rely primarily on U.S.-based forces to respond to global crises and conflicts, keeping only a small global forward presence to reassure allies and partners. Such a choice would be based on the perspective that deterring and responding to China, North Korea, and Iran in the future will depend not on overseas presence but rather on the capabilities of U.S. military forces at home to be able to surge into the regions in the event of crises or conflict. This would be the case for reassuring U.S. allies and partners as well. Such a choice would involve the United States relying on mobility forces and bases overseas, plus only a few combat forces, and seeking access to bases more glob-

ally were threats from China and Iran to expand. Transitioning U.S. military forces to the United States would have the advantage of reducing their vulnerability to expanding missile threats.

Choosing to reduce overseas U.S. military presence does not make sense if the perspective is that overseas U.S. presence plays an important role in deterring and responding to one or more of the threats that China, North Korea, and Iran pose and in reassuring U.S. allies and partners. The strategic choice that then arises is whether the United States should maintain its global posture essentially as today and prepare to increase its overseas presence in Southeast and Southwest Asia if threats expand. Keeping existing bases would have the advantage of reducing the risks associated with not being able to return to bases once given up.

Such a robust global posture could become too expensive or politically problematic in some countries. So, the final strategic choice is whether the United States should focus its overseas U.S. presence more on Asia (because of the need to influence China's expanding military activities) or on the Middle East (because of the threats to stability and the flow of oil from a potentially nuclear-armed Iran). Choosing to emphasize Asia would involve keeping planned bases and military forces in Japan and South Korea, then expanding rotational deployments and exercises to the extent they become politically feasible with countries in Southeast Asia. Choosing to emphasize the Middle East would have the United States rely more on surging military forces from the United States for contingencies in Asia and keeping bases in the Gulf Cooperation Council states and Africa to be able to blunt quickly any attacks on U.S. partners and to provide reassurance. In each of these cases, the choice would involve reorienting the focus of U.S. military forces in Europe to be able to surge forces from the United States to respond to crises and conflicts in the region where U.S. presence was reduced.

There is no one right strategic choice, but in our view, those involved in debates on the future global U.S. posture need to make explicit their implicit underlying perspectives on what role overseas military presence can play in achieving U.S. global security interests and then make decisions based on this menu of strategic choices. This

makes it possible that future U.S. overseas military presence can be based on agreement on how well it serves U.S. global security interests and not on other, unrelated considerations, as is often the case today.