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U.S. Global Defense Posture, 1783–2011

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Prepared for the United States Air Force

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Summary

Background and Purpose

The current U.S. global defense posture—that is, the location and primary operational orientation of the nation’s military personnel and the military facilities that its troops have access to—is under increasing pressure from a number of sources, including budgetary constraints, precision-guided weapons that reduce the survivability of forward bases, and host-nation opposition to a U.S. military presence.

These debates over the shape of the U.S. overseas military presence are not without precedent. As policymakers today evaluate the U.S. forward military presence, it is important that they understand how and why the U.S. global posture has changed. This monograph aims to describe the evolution of the U.S. global defense posture from 1783 to the present and to explain how the United States has grown from a relatively weak and insular regional power that was primarily concerned with territorial defense into the preeminent global power, with an expansive system of overseas bases and forward-deployed forces that enable it to conduct expeditionary operations around the globe. Moreover, this historical overview has important implications for current policy and future efforts to develop a U.S. military strategy, in particular, the scope, size, and type of military presence overseas. As new and unpredictable threats emerge, alliance relationships are revised, and resources decline, past efforts at dealing with similar problems may yield important lessons for future decisions.

Summary of Findings

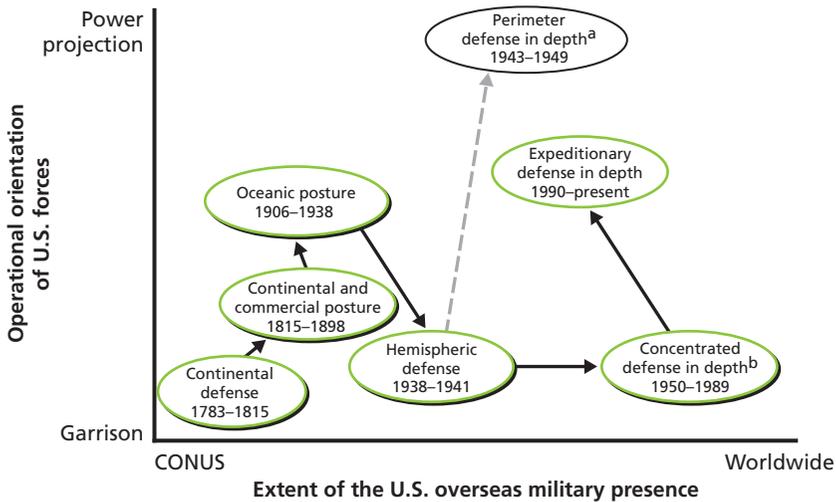
Many factors differentiate the U.S. global postures of the past. Arguably the two most important of these factors are the extent of the U.S. overseas military presence and the primary operational orientation of U.S. troops located both at home and abroad. The first refers to the location, type, and number of U.S. forces temporarily or permanently deployed abroad and the military facilities outside the continental United States that U.S. troops have access to. The second indicates whether U.S. forces intend to fight where they are based or to redeploy and conduct operations in other theaters. Obviously, this typology greatly simplifies reality. Nevertheless, it identifies fundamental distinctions between past defense postures and creates ideal types that help to illustrate changes in the U.S. global defense posture.

Since independence, senior officials have developed and at least partially implemented seven distinct and identifiable U.S. global postures: continental defense (1783–1815), continental defense and commercialism (1815–1898), oceanic posture and surge deployments (1906–1938), hemispheric defense (1938–1941), perimeter defense in depth (1943–1949), consolidated defense in depth (1950–1989), and expeditionary defense in depth (1990–present). (See Figure S.1.)

While there have been seven different global postures, three critical breakpoints stand out because they have had a dramatic and enduring influence on the scope and scale of the U.S. overseas military presence. First, the establishment of station squadrons led to the expansion of continental defense in favor of a hybrid continental and commercial posture. Taking this first step to protect U.S. overseas trade from predatory actors broke American officials out of the continental mindset and set the precedent that the U.S. military needed to be involved in global affairs to further the nation's interests.

Second, as a consequence of its victory in the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States acquired a number of territories in the Far East and the Caribbean. Not only did these overseas possessions enable U.S. forces to operate in other regions, they also provided a new justification for deploying military forces abroad because the United States was compelled to defend its expanding strategic frontier. In fact,

Figure S.1
Ideal Type Defense Postures, 1783–Present



^a Planned strategy that was never fully implemented.

^b Focused on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and North Korea.

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these developments first established the nation as an Asia-Pacific power, a role it still prioritizes today.

Third, World War II prompted an enduring shift in the preferred strategy of U.S. officials to one of defense in depth. A consensus formed that the United States needed to maintain a robust forward military presence to ensure the security of the nation. This decision irrevocably shaped U.S. military strategy from that point forward, even though the nature of the U.S. overseas military presence—which evolved from perimeter defense in depth to consolidated defense in depth to expeditionary defense in depth—has changed. The preceding analysis yields a number of recommendations.

Recommendations

The Importance of Strategic Planning

Historically, major changes to the U.S. global defense posture have only been successfully implemented in the wake of an exogenous shock. Nevertheless, planning efforts were critical because they enabled policymakers to identify the type of presence that they needed and allowed them to act more rapidly to implement earlier plans when the circumstances became favorable.

Think Globally

With the United States once again focused on projecting power throughout the world, it is important that U.S. planners have a truly global perspective. In the 1940s, postwar planning for a U.S. system of overseas bases was not only serious and sustained but also global in scope. In part because the Joint Chiefs of Staff examined a world map that was not artificially divided into areas of responsibility, they identified critical locations in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and along the Mediterranean that would fall along the seams of today's combatant command areas of responsibility. One impediment to a truly global perspective, however, is the influence of the combatant commands on the planning process. Despite their importance, the Pentagon needs to ensure that its global defense posture is developed from a top-down, not a bottom-up, perspective, one that takes into account the ways a military presence in one region could facilitate operations in other regions. By tailoring an overseas presence to a single atomized area of responsibility, planners may overlook potential synergies between regions and risk creating an inefficient global posture that is optimized only for intraregional operations.

Connect Continental U.S. and Outside the Continental U.S. Basing Efforts

A global defense posture necessarily includes the location of forces and facilities at home and abroad because the two are intrinsically linked. When the Pentagon reviews and modifies the U.S. overseas military presence, it often makes decisions that result in forces either returning

to the continental United States (CONUS) or leaving it, both of which have implications for the base realignment and closure process. Despite this, the planning processes for CONUS and outside CONUS basing generally proceed separately. The 2004 Global Defense Posture Review coordinated its initiatives with the base realignment and closure process that was concurrently under way, which ensured that the two reviews' recommendations were complementary (or at least not at cross-purposes) and facilitated the implementation of both undertakings.

Develop a Lighter, More Agile Footprint Overseas

The mounting pressure on the existing U.S. forward military presence is likely to require a greater emphasis on forward operating sites and cooperative security locations situated on the perimeters of the major continents. Forward operating sites or cooperative security locations are less expensive to operate and maintain than main operating bases, are less likely to cause friction with the local population, and are more likely to be accepted by the host nation, thereby improving the ability of the United States to make inroads in critical regions where it currently has little to no presence. Ultimately, the United States should adopt a posture that is more versatile and less costly, vulnerable, and conspicuous.

An overseas military presence with a lighter footprint and that is situated on the periphery would be a significant departure from the global posture that the United States has had in place for more than 60 years. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the consolidated defense in depth posture was unusual in two important respects: The United States established large main operating bases with a permanent U.S. military presence (which are a historical anomaly for any nation, including the United States), and many of these facilities were located inland on the European and Asian continents.

Opportunistically Expand the U.S. Presence Abroad

Across history, the most common reason for another nation permitting the United States to establish a military presence on its territory is a shared perception of threat. Absent a serious danger to their security, nations are unlikely to voluntarily circumscribe their sovereignty by

temporarily providing U.S. forces access to military facilities on their territories or by allowing the United States to permanently station its forces within their borders. If U.S. policymakers continue to regard an overseas military presence as essential, the Department of Defense would benefit by seizing on opportune moments when shared perception of threat is rising to expand its military presence in key regions and thereby enhance its ability to patrol the global commons, reassure allies under duress, and deter prospective adversaries from attempting to revise the status quo by threat or use of force.