



# Deterrence and Escalation in Competition with Russia

## The Role of Ground Forces in Preventing Hostile Measures Below Armed Conflict in Europe

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U.S. forward military posture can both deter and provoke armed conflict, and a similar logic pertains below the level of armed conflict. The authors of this report identify how forward posture could deter hostile measures in the competition space below the level of armed conflict through several mechanisms, particularly focusing on the presence of U.S. ground forces.



### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How might the United States' forward military posture be used to deter Russia from additional aggressive actions in the competition space?
- Which U.S. military postures might provoke Russia to escalate?
- What are Russia's escalation options and their implications?
- What preventive or mitigating measures can the United States take to reduce the likelihood of escalation?



### KEY FINDINGS

- The same logic of deterrence that has been applied to armed conflict for decades generally also applies to competition below the level of armed conflict, but the effects of U.S. forward posture are more subtle in the competition space.
- U.S. military forward posture (including U.S. forces positioned overseas, activities conducted by U.S. military forces, and military agreements) has the potential to deter hostile measures (such as economic coercion, political subversion, and military intimidation). Employed inappropriately, however, it also has the potential to provoke them.
- Whether the outcome is escalatory or deterrent depends on the type of posture (forces, activities, and agreements) and three characteristics of its employment: proximity, continuity, and capability.

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- Of the elements of forward posture, U.S. forces are most consistently associated with deterrence. Forces send a strong signal of U.S. commitment and provide important capabilities. When these forces are first introduced in-theater, however, they can make host countries the targets of Russian hostile measures.
- U.S. military activities (such as multilateral military exercises) are less likely to deter Russian hostile measures and more likely to lead to escalation. Escalatory risks are reduced when the United States conducts such activities farther from Russia and takes measures to increase their predictability.
- Military agreements also can deter malign activities, especially when the United States enters into an alliance, thus putting its international reputation at stake. Lesser military agreements are weaker deterrents.
- Many escalatory consequences are not proximate in space or time. Instead of a clear action-reaction cycle, there are often considerable lags before Russian reactions and thus greater opportunities for misunderstanding.
- Typically, forward posture is one contributing factor to competition outcomes, is seldom the primary driver, and most often has effects that are cumulative and long-term.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- U.S. decisionmakers should think of U.S. posture primarily as an enabler of a much broader strategy that incorporates the full range of the instruments of national power.
- U.S. decisionmakers should base U.S. forward posture changes on specific objectives.
- Dynamic Force Employment is best used as a supplement to persistent presence, not a substitute, and only if appropriate measures are taken to mitigate the associated risks.
- The United States should adopt rigorous interagency risk assessment and evaluation processes. When evaluating the consequences of U.S. posture decisions after the fact, the United States should not only look for immediate Russian reactions but should also explore longer-term and indirect dynamics.