

An Excerpt from

Healing the Wounded Giant
Maintaining Military Preeminence While Cutting the Defense Budget

By Michael E. O'Hanlon, Brookings Institution Press, 2013

Throughout the 1990s, U.S. ground forces were sized and shaped primarily to maintain a two-war capability. The wars were assumed to begin in fairly rapid succession (though not exactly simultaneously), and then overlap, lasting several months to perhaps a year or two. Three separate administrations—those of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, and a total of five defense secretaries (Richard Cheney, Les Aspin, William Perry, William Cohen, and Donald Rumsfeld)—endorsed some variant of the two-war capability. They formalized the logic in the first Bush administration's 1992 "Base Force" concept, the Clinton administration's 1993 "Bottom-Up Review" followed four years later by the first Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), and then Secretary Rumsfeld's own 2001 and 2006 QDRs. These reviews all gave considerable attention to both Iraq and North Korea as plausible adversaries. More generally, though, they postulated that the United States could not predict all future enemies or conflicts, and that there was a strong deterrent logic in being able to handle more than one problem at a time. Otherwise, if engaged in a single war in one place, the United States could be vulnerable to opportunistic adversaries elsewhere. This approach clearly could not deter all conflicts; for one thing, having military capability does not always translate into a willingness to use that capability. But in places where American resolve is most manifest, the rationale would seem to be reasonably compelling. While Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein is gone, and Iraq now poses much less of a direct overland invasion threat to its neighbors and the region, much of this deterrent logic remains valid, though it can now be modified.

The Obama administration appears to agree. Its 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review states that after successfully concluding current wars, "in the mid- to long term, U.S. military forces must plan and prepare to prevail in a broad range of operations that may occur in multiple theaters in overlapping time frames. That includes maintaining the ability to prevail against two capable nation-state aggressors. . . ." Still, Obama scaled back the presumed likelihood of two truly simultaneous large land wars. Indeed, his January 2012 Pentagon guidance places somewhat more limited demands upon U.S. forces, stating that "even when U.S. forces are committed to a large-scale operation in one region, they will be capable of denying the objectives of—or imposing unacceptable costs on—an opportunistic aggressor in a second region."⁵ The same review also stated that planning for large-scale stabilization missions would no longer drive the size of U.S. ground forces.

Although the feasibility of ruling out large-scale stabilization missions quite so categorically can be debated, I believe the two-war requirement can be scaled back somewhat further for purposes of force

planning. A new ground-force planning paradigm might be termed “one war plus two missions” or “1 + 2.” Those missions might, for example, include residual efforts in Afghanistan, contribution to peacekeeping in a place like Congo, or perhaps contribution to a future multilateral stabilization force in Syria or Yemen (even if such missions seem unlikely and undesirable at present). This approach strikes the right balance. It is prudent because it provides some additional capability if and when the nation again engages in a major conflict, and because it provides a bit of a combat cushion should that war go less well than initially hoped. It is modest and economical, however, because it assumes only one such conflict at a time (despite the experience of the last decade) and because it does not envision major ground wars against the world’s major overseas powers on their territories.

If a conflict pitted the United States against China, for example, it is reasonable to assume that the fighting would be in maritime and littoral regions. That is because the most plausible threat that China would pose is to Taiwan, or perhaps to neighboring states over disputed sea and seabed resources. Similarly, in regard to possible war against Iran, the most plausible conflict would focus on its nuclear program and waterways in and about the Persian Gulf. Neither of these scenarios would be likely to involve substantial numbers of American ground forces. It is therefore reasonable for the United States to have the capability for just one ground war at a time as long as it can respond in other ways to other possibly simultaneous and overlapping challenges abroad.

Moreover, the “1 + 2” concept provides some remaining capacity for a small initial response in a second conflict. The forces for the two presumed smaller and less lethal missions could if necessary provide the vanguard of a blocking or emergency response force in the very unlikely event of a second major conflict. And while my option would not increase the size of the Army National Guard, Army Reserve, or Marine Corps Reserve, it would not cut them substantially either—meaning these forces would remain available not only to support active forces in immediate operations but to provide the basis for a rapid increase in active-duty strength through more general mobilization should that be needed.

We should not overestimate the quick-response capabilities of the main combat brigades of the Army National Guard in particular. In the 1980s and 1990s they were perhaps underappreciated; today, because they distinguished themselves in many ways in Iraq and Afghanistan, the risk is that we will forget that it took time for this capability to be honed and we will exaggerate what they can do within a few months of mobilization, early in any future war. But other parts of the reserve component are hugely important and capable, and as a strategic reserve for mobilization purposes, the Army National Guard is too.

Admittedly, despite the hedge provided by the “1 + 2” concept, there is some risk associated with dialing back capabilities in this way, but it would not be radical or unprecedented. During the cold war, American defense posture varied between periods of major ambition—as with the “two war” framework of the 1960s that envisioned simultaneous conflicts against the Soviet Union (probably in Europe), China in East Asia, and some smaller foe elsewhere—and somewhat more realistic approaches, as under Richard Nixon, which dropped the requirement to two wars. Nixon’s “1 war” would have been conflict in Europe against the Warsaw Pact, a threat that is now gone. His regional war capability, or his “1/2 war” posture, was therefore similar to what I am proposing here.

To compensate for its modest size, this one-war combat capability needs to be responsive and highly effective. That fact has implications in areas like strategic transport, which must not be reduced. It also

has implications for the National Guard and Reserves, which remain indispensable parts of the total force. They have done well in Iraq and Afghanistan and merit substantial support in the years ahead—better than they have often received in our nation’s past. But they are not able to carry out prompt deployments to crises or conflicts in the way that current American security commitments and current deterrence strategy require. As such, we should not move to a “citizens army” that depends primarily on reservists for the nation’s defense.

What does the 1 + 2 framework mean for sizing the Army and Marine Corps? It should allow for roughly 15 percent cutbacks relative to recent peak levels. Army active-duty brigade combat teams might number about thirty-eight, with the National Guard adding twenty-four more. (Alternatively, the Army may wind up with less than thirty-eight if it adds a third maneuver battalion to each.) Combat aviation units might decline to eleven and seven brigades in the active and National Guard forces, respectively.

The Marines would give up two major units, resulting in ten infantry and three artillery regiments in their active forces, while keeping their three divisions and three associated Marine Expeditionary Forces.

The resulting combined ground force would be enough to sustain about twenty combat brigades overseas indefinitely, and to surge to twenty-five to thirty if need be.

This force-sizing math is based on the principle that active forces should have roughly twice as much time at home as on deployment and that reservists should have five times as much time at home as abroad. That would allow enough military capacity for the main invasion phase of the kinds of wars assumed throughout 1990s defense planning and the invasion of Iraq actually carried out in 2003; force packages ranging from fifteen to twenty brigades were generally assumed or used for these missions.

The capacity outlined above falls short of the twenty-two brigades deployed in 2007/2008 just to Iraq and Afghanistan. If long crises or conflicts occurred in the future, therefore, we would have to ratchet force strength back up. The Army and Marine Corps of the last ten years have, fortunately, already proven they can do this. They added 15 percent in new capability within about half a decade without any reduction in the excellence of individual units.

Some might question whether we even still need a one-war capability. But it is not hard to imagine plausible scenarios. Even if each specific case is unlikely, a number of scenarios cannot be ruled out.

Consider a possible contingency on the Korean peninsula. This would not necessarily result from the traditional scenario of an invasion of South Korea by the North. It could be sparked, rather, by an internal coup or schism within North Korea that destabilized the country and put the security of its nuclear weapons at risk. It also could result, somewhat inadvertently, from an exchange of gunfire on land or sea that escalated into North Korean long-range artillery and missile attacks on South Korea’s nearby capital of Seoul. The North Korean aggressions of 2010, including the brazen sinking of the South Korean Navy ship *Cheonan* and subsequent attacks on a remote South Korean island that together killed about 50 South Koreans, are instructive here.

Alternatively, if North Korea greatly accelerated its production of nuclear bombs—it is now believed to have about eight—or seemed on the verge of selling nuclear materials to a terrorist group, the United

States and South Korea might decide to preempt with a limited strike against its nuclear facilities. North Korea might then respond in dramatic fashion.

The allies would surely defeat North Korea in any war and then quite probably occupy the country and change its government. North Korea's weaponry is more obsolescent than ever, it faces major fuel and spare parts shortages in training and preparing its forces, and its personnel are undernourished and otherwise underprepared. Yet North Korea has a million-man army, as well as a very large reserve. All these soldiers can be assumed to have workable small arms. The nature of the terrain in Korea means that much of the battle would ultimately be infantry combat. North Korean soldiers are still indoctrinated with the notion that they must defend their homeland at all costs. For a half-century, North Korea has built up fortifications near the DMZ that could make the task of extricating its forces difficult and bloody. North Korea also has among the world's largest artillery concentrations and could conduct intense shelling of Seoul in any war from positions that its forces already occupy.

Even the potential for nuclear attacks by the North against South Korean, Japanese, or American assets cannot be dismissed. Attempts at outright annihilation of Seoul or Tokyo would make little sense, as allied forces could respond in kind and would surely track down the perpetrators of such a heinous crime. Any North Korean nuclear attack on a major allied city would mean overthrow of the Pyongyang regime and almost surely death (or at least lifetime imprisonment) for its leaders once they were found. But Pyongyang might try more limited actions. Perhaps it would try to use one nuclear bomb, out of its presumed arsenal of eight or so, against a remote airbase or troop concentration. This could weaken allied defenses in a key sector while also signaling the North's willingness to escalate further if necessary. It would be a hugely risky move but is not totally inconceivable given previous North Korean actions.

Possible Chinese intervention would have to be guarded against, as well. Beijing would probably not be eager to come to the armed defense of the most fanatical military dictatorship left on earth. But it also has treaty obligations with the North that may complicate its calculations. And it would be worried about any possibility of American encroachment into North Korean lands near its borders. It might seek to preempt that possibility by moving its own forces into northern North Korea to establish a buffer zone. For all these reasons, a Korean war could have broader regional implications. This requires that Washington and Seoul maintain close consultations with Beijing in any future crisis or conflict and perhaps find ways to anticipate or even welcome a possible limited Chinese military role in such a scenario. But it also suggests that U.S. and South Korean forces would want to have the capability to win any war against the North quickly and decisively, before Seoul was destroyed or nuclear weapons used or nuclear materials smuggled out of the country, for example. Moving fast would also reduce the odds that China would decide to establish an overly large buffer zone in an anarchic North Korea with its own forces in a way that could bring Chinese and allied soldiers into close proximity.

Chances are that none of the above will happen, precisely because North Korea knows what the consequences would be. This is an argument for making cuts carefully and retaining American engagement in Korea. Deterrence is working. American strategy on balance is successful there and elsewhere in keeping the peace, and the United States must not lose sight of this key reality in its efforts to cut the deficit. Modest defense cuts may be sensible; radical changes should be considered with great skepticism given the ongoing threats of today's international environment.

To sustain deterrence, U.S. forces available for Korea—in addition to the 30,000 now stationed there—should remain quite substantial. They might focus largely on air and naval capabilities, given South Korea's large and improved army. But they should also involve American ground forces, since a speedy victory would be of the essence, and since as noted the fighting could be quite difficult and manpower requirements intensive. Some have argued that, given the mathematical requirements of a stabilization mission in a country of some 24 million, South Korea's army could in principle handle much of the stabilization task itself, since it could generate up to 400,000 soldiers. But that perspective overlooks the potential challenges of defeating North Korea's army militarily on such complex terrain in a serious fight—in contrast to the requirements of a more benign stabilization mission. Deterrence also works better when leaders in Pyongyang cannot persuade themselves that South Korea could somehow be intimidated into a coerced compromise if it was abandoned by erstwhile allies. For all these reasons, being able to bring several U.S. divisions to bear makes eminent military sense.

American ground forces would also be important because American mobile assets (such as the 101st air assault division and Marine amphibious forces) provide capabilities that South Korea does not itself possess in comparable numbers. These U.S. forces could, among other things, help seal North Korean borders so nuclear materials could not be smuggled out. Perhaps fifteen to twenty brigade-sized forces and eight to ten fighter wings, as well as three to four carrier battle groups, would be employed by the United States, as all previous defense reviews of the post-cold war era have rightly concluded. American forces might not be needed long in any occupation of the North, given South Korea's large capabilities, but they could be crucial for a few months.

Standing U.S. ground forces that were 15 percent smaller than today's could handle the above. They would also provide options for other remote, yet hardly inconceivable, scenarios. For example, they would retain the ability to overthrow a regime such as that in Teheran that carried out a heinous act of aggression or terror against American interests. That type of operation is highly improbable, and would be extraordinarily difficult—but the capability to conduct it, in extremis, could be a deterrent. (Such a capability could also be useful against any other powerful extremist government with ties to terrorists and nuclear ambitions or capabilities.) Overthrowing Iran's government and leaving the country in chaos would hardly be an ideal outcome. But the prospect could nonetheless be a meaningful deterrent against Iranian extremism, as the United States could, if absolutely necessary, defeat and largely destroy the Revolutionary Guard and Qods forces that keep the current extremists in power. The aggregate size, combat capability, divisional force structure, combat aircraft inventories, and other such capabilities of the Iranian forces are broadly consistent with those of the nominal regional foe that has focused American defense planning for two decades. These facts suggest that what has been viewed as a "one regional war" American force package would likely be adequate to defeat and/or largely destroy the Iranian military.

To the extent that the international community as a whole then saw the reestablishment of order in Iran as important, U.S. allies could, if desired, help provide ground forces in a subsequent coalition to stabilize the country—a job that could require half a million troops. (Even today's American ground forces would in fact be inadequate to the job of stabilizing Iran, which with 80 million people is three times as populous as either Iraq or Afghanistan.) Other ground combat scenarios against Iran can be imagined too, if for example Iran retaliates against a U.S. or Israeli air strike by invading a neighbor—an unlikely but also hardly unthinkable contingency.

Another quite worrisome scenario could involve a new Indo- Pakistani crisis leading to war between the two nuclear-armed states over Kashmir. This could result, for example, if a more extremist civilian or military leader came to power in Pakistan. As my colleagues Bruce Riedel, Stephen Cohen, and Strobe Talbott have shown, it is quite feasible to see how such an extremist state could take South Asia to the brink of nuclear war by provoking conflict with India. Were that to happen, and perhaps a nuke or two even detonated above an airbase or other such military facility, the world could be faced with the specter of all-out nuclear war in the most densely populated part of the planet.

While hostilities continued, even if the United States would probably avoid taking sides on the ground, Washington might want the option to help India protect itself from missile strikes by Pakistan. It is even possible that the United States might, depending on how the conflict began, consider trying to shoot down any missile launched from either side at the other, given the huge human and strategic perils associated with nuclear-armed missiles striking the great cities of South Asia.

It is also imaginable that if such a war began and international negotiators were trying to figure out how to end it, an international force could be considered to help implement a cease-fire accord in Kashmir for a number of years. India would be adamantly against this idea today, but things could change if war broke out and such a force seemed the only way to reverse the momentum toward all-out nuclear war in South Asia. American forces would quite likely need to play a key role, since other countries do not have the capacity or political confidence to handle the mission on their own.

With forty-eight brigade equivalents in its active Army and Marine Corps forces, and another twenty-four Army National Guard brigades, the United States could handle a combination of challenges reasonably well. Suppose, for example, that in 2015 the United States had two brigades in a stabilization mission in Yemen and two brigades still in Afghanistan. Imagine that another war in Korea broke out, requiring a peak of twenty U.S. combat brigades for the first three months, after which fifteen were needed for another year or more. That would be within the capacity of the smaller force.

What is the presumed role of U.S. allies in all of the above? And is it possible to encourage them to do more in the future? Some have understandably raised this question at a time when the United States outspends its allies on defense by a wide margin, not only in terms of actual dollars but in terms of the percentage of GDP devoted to the military. Hans Binnendijk, for example, proposes a concept of “forward partnering.”

The fact that America has so many allies is extremely important—it signals that most other major powers around the world are at least loosely aligned with America on major strategic matters. They may not choose to be with the United States on every mission, as the Iraq experience proves. But when America is directly threatened, as with 9/11, the Western alliance system is rather extraordinary. This has been evidenced in Afghanistan where, even beyond the ten-year mark of the war, the coalition still includes combat forces from some forty-eight countries.

How much help do these allies tend to provide? Here the answer is, and will remain, more nuanced. The other forty-seven nations in Afghanistan, at the mission’s peak size in 2011, collectively provided fewer than one-third of all foreign forces; the United States by itself provided more than two-thirds. Still, a peak of more than 40,000 non-Afghan forces from countries besides the United States is nothing to trivialize.

The allies took the lead in Libya in 2011. But this may be the exception that proves the rule—the mission that the Europeans led was a very limited air campaign in a nearby country. The French also helped depose a brutal dictator in their former colony of the Ivory Coast in 2011, and as of this writing they are attempting militarily to stabilize northern Mali, though with uncertain prospects at present. These operations have on balance been courageous, and somewhat effective, but limited in scope and size. Some European and Asian allies, as well as other nations, continue to slog away in UN peacekeeping operations in places such as Congo and Lebanon. The Australians tend to be dependable partners; Canada did a great deal in Afghanistan and took heavy losses before finally pulling out its combat forces in 2011. In Asia, the Japanese are also showing some greater assertiveness as their concerns about China's rise lead to more muscular naval operations by Tokyo.

Still, the allies are not stepping up their overall defense efforts, and they almost surely will not in the future. Any hope that the election of Barack Obama with his more inclusive and multilateral style of leadership would lead them to do so are proving generally unwarranted. NATO defense spending is slipping downward, from a starting point that was not very impressive. American allies were collectively more capable in the 1990s, when they contributed most of the ground troops that NATO deployed to the Balkans, than today.

The fraction of GDP that the NATO allies spend on their armed forces had declined to about 1.5 percent by 2012, well under half the U.S. figure. That compares to NATO's average level of 2.2 percent in 2000 and about 2.5 percent in 1990. Before he left office in 2011, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates accordingly warned of the possibility of a two-tier alliance.

When allies feel directly threatened, as Japan and South Korea sometimes do now, they will contribute. South Korea in particular can be counted on to provide many air and naval forces, and most of the needed ground forces, for any major operation on the peninsula in the future. (South Korea is generally, and understandably, less enthusiastic about being pulled into an anti-China coalition.) Taiwan would surely do what it could to help fend off a possible Chinese attack, not leaving the whole job to the American military in the event that terrible scenario someday unfolded (though in terms of preparation, its \$10 billion annual budget pales compared to China's and has dropped to just over 2 percent of GDP). Many if not most NATO forces will be careful in drawing down troops from Afghanistan, making cuts roughly in proportion with those of the United States over the next two years.

In the Persian Gulf, both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have impressive air forces, each with at least 100 top-of-the-line aircraft, many of them procured from the United States. Both countries certainly could help provide patrols over their own airspace as defensive measures in a future conflict. If they had already been directly attacked by Iran, they might also be willing to carry out counterstrikes against Iranian land or sea targets. But again there are limits. If Iran had not actually attacked their territories, Saudi Arabia and the UAE might prefer to avoid striking Iran themselves first—since once the hostilities ended, they would have to coexist in the same neighborhood. For that and other reasons, it is not completely clear that the United States could count on regional allies to do more than the very important but still limited task of protecting their own airspace. Washington could hope for more but should not count on it for force-planning purposes.

Britain can probably be counted on for a brigade or two—up to 10,000 troops, perhaps, as in Afghanistan—for most major operations that the United States might consider in the future. Some new NATO allies like Poland and Romania, and some potential aspirants like Georgia, will try to help where they can, largely to solidify ties to America that they consider crucial for their security. The allies also may have enough collective capacity, and political will, to share responsibility for humanitarian and peace operations in the future. However, the record of the entire Western world, including the United States, is patchy at best on that front. Numerous countries will contribute modestly to limited and low-risk missions like the counter-piracy patrols off the coast of Somalia. If future naval operations are needed to monitor or enforce future sanctions on Iran, Washington may get a few allies to participate. But that is about as far as most allies will go.

The United States need not, and should not, accept primary responsibility for future military operations of a peacekeeping or humanitarian character. But in terms of planning for major war, it will have to assume that its forces—together with those of directly threatened allies—will provide the preponderance of future capability. In specific cases, Washington can always hope for more help. But for planning purposes, it should not count on it. This fact is regrettable at one level. But America should be careful to avoid making the perfect the enemy of the good. The United States leads the greatest alliance system in history, and that fundamental reality is a huge strategic asset that Washington should not jeopardize with unrealistic demands on its security partners. Nor should the United States take a grand strategic gamble of unilateral retrenchment in the hope that such a pullback will produce desirable reactions in key overseas theaters.