

Bringing Great-Power Competition to the Tactical Level: European Rotational Deployment Considerations for Company-Grade Armor Leaders

by MAJ Brigid Calhoun and CPT Alexander Boroff

On July 29, 2020, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper unveiled his new plan for European Command's force posture, which will result in the reduction of 11,900 troops currently stationed in Germany.¹ Of those troops, 5,600 will be repositioned across Europe, while 4,600 will redeploy to the continental United States and subsequently conduct rotational deployments to Europe.² This decision follows an extensive Defense Department (DoD)-wide review designed to optimize U.S. military force posture within the strategic environment of great-power competition.

Discussion and analysis of great-power competition currently dominate national-security and defense-strategy forums. This article seeks to distill the concept and its implications down to the tactical level of war by explaining great-power competition to company-level leaders; describing the European operational environment where these leaders may rotationally deploy; and providing leadership and planning considerations for their rotations.

Although the Indo-Pacific region remains the focal point of U.S. national security, the European theater and Russian threats demand deterrence from forward-staged Army forces. Company-level Armor leaders will likely spend at least the next decade of their careers preparing to fight and win ground wars in this contested environment. Studying and understanding the grand strategy of great-power competition will prove instrumental to their success.

What is great-power competition?

In the unclassified 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis stated that "inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."³ The NDS further explained that "[t]he central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the re-emergence of long-term strategic competition by what the National Security Strategy (NSS) classifies as revisionist powers."

It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model — gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic and security decisions."⁴ The NDS cites Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia and 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula as catalyzing events in a new era of strategic competition in Europe.⁵ Russia's disregard of the rules-based international order, state sovereignty and territorial integrity threatens the stability of Europe. Instability in turn threatens "unfettered access to the global commons (air, sea, space and cyberspace) for all," a key U.S. national interest.⁶ Such actions put the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on edge, as our allies, particularly on the eastern flanks of Europe, wonder if they will be the next target of a Russian attack.

Both the NSS and NDS call for whole-of-government solutions to build and assert U.S. competitive advantages across all domains using various instruments of national power. The military's diplomatic, information, military and economic paradigm provides a useful framework to demonstrate how the instruments of national power unite policy alternatives across government departments and agencies. Specifically within Europe, the U.S. military solution to Russian aggression requires forward presence, flexible response options and strengthening NATO by reassuring allies.⁷

Company-level Armor leaders participating in rotational deployments thus operationalize these strategic objectives. The hallmarks of European rotational deployments — including combat-training-center tours, partnered exercises and maintenance of professional relationships with NATO partners — nest neatly within the NDS and NSS.



Figure 1. Soldiers from various NATO countries train together at the Grafenwoehr and Hohenfels training areas in Germany during Exercise Combined Resolve IV in 2016. The 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart GA, participated in Combined Resolve IV as the primary U.S. Army training unit; the unit is the Army's regionally aligned brigade to Europe. Combined Resolve is a series of bi-annual U.S. Army Europe exercises designed to train participants to function together in a multinational and integrated environment and to train U.S. Army rotational forces in Europe to be more flexible, agile and better able to operate alongside allies and partners in the region. Combined Resolve IV featured more than 4,700 participants from 10 NATO allies, including Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia, the United States and three partner nations of Moldova, Montenegro and Serbia. (U.S. Army photo)

Impact on U.S. forces in Europe

While much of the national great-power competition dialogue has rightfully focused on China's aggression within the Indo-Pacific, Russia remains, in large part, the Army's most direct competitor. Forward-positioned Army aviation and Armor forces constitute critical capabilities for countering Russian threats to European territorial integrity and U.S. national interests. A brief review of U.S. force posture trends in Europe may help company-level Armor leaders understand why their continued presence on the continent is so important to our nation's ability to maintain competitive advantage over Russia and preserve the rules-based international order.

While the 12th Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) is permanently assigned to Ansbach, Germany, no permanent armored brigade combat team (ABCT) has existed in Europe since 2014.⁸ Russia's invasion of the Crimean Peninsula that same year, however, rapidly reversed America's decision to retrograde its armored forces. In an effort to re-establish deterrence following this invasion, the United States sent small numbers of tanks to Europe for short deployments throughout 2015.⁹

The following year brought significant changes to the U.S. force posture in Europe. A seminal 2016 report by the RAND Corporation wargamed a hypothetical Russian invasion of the Baltic States and alarmingly found that Russian forces would reach the outskirts of the Estonian and/or Latvian capitals within 36-60 hours. The report further assessed that existing NATO defenses would be overwhelmed and that NATO would have to launch a

bloody counteroffensive to eject Russian forces from the Baltics. RAND ultimately recommended that NATO position a force of about seven brigades, three of which should be ABCTs, augmented by airpower and fire support, in the Baltics to prevent their rapid overrun by Russia.

NATO had arrived at similar conclusions and solidified the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) initiative at the July 2016 Warsaw Summit. The EFP resulted in the assignment of four multinational battalions, separately led by Germany, Great Britain, Canada and the United States, each to Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; it was the largest addition to the NATO defense posture in a generation. In 2017, the Army contributed more forces outside of the NATO context by executing its first nine-month heel-to-toe regionally aligned force (RAF) deployments of ABCTs and CABs to Europe.

Despite the push toward a sustained-readiness model, which ideally maintains all units at a high level of readiness, operational and tactical realities intervene and prevent constant readiness, especially with the strain the rotations place on the armored force. The rotations of ABCTs to the European theater will likely continue in the near term, even as discussions among DoD, Congress and NATO allies continue regarding the possible drawdown of U.S. forces in Germany and the potential establishment of a permanent U.S. base in Poland.

Meaning for company-grade leader

Secretary Esper's emphasis on rotational forces is part of the answer to this question, especially if the person posing the question is an Armor officer.¹⁰ Without attempting to analyze the advantages or disadvantages the rotational deployment policy possesses, Europe, South Korea and, in a lesser vein, Kuwait, remain the U.S. Army's anchor points across the globe to both assure allies of the U.S. our commitment to their defense and to dissuade enemies from moving into positions of relative advantage. While the location of these rotational deployments may change, they will likely comprise the bulk of a company-grade leader's direct experience with great-power competition. And although these same officers may have been hailed as "strategic lieutenants" in the past, they now occupy more traditional roles at the tactical level as part of conventional combined-arms teams.¹¹ They still must be educated in strategy, history and current affairs to make informed decisions.

Company-level officers or noncommissioned officers (NCOs) may find themselves as the ranking U.S. military representatives at a particular partnered training event or garrison. However, they will generally not occupy positions analogous to the platoon-level combat outposts characteristic of counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Certainly, interactions with allies that are frequently a part of rotational deployments play a significant role in diplomatic relations between the militaries of said countries. Rotational deployments to Europe will require company-level armor leaders to build rapport with foreign allies and partners, and may often find that the relationships become increasingly habitual over the course of a nine-month training deployment. Nevertheless, the great-power competitor at the tactical level must be trained and ready to execute a great-power war, hopefully only as a deterrent to the reality of one.

Learning terrain, enemy

Preparation for likely RAF deployments should begin with every Soldier understanding the tactical, operational and strategic environment into which the unit will deploy. Leaders should leverage their unit intelligence section to provide background briefings in addition to the doctrinal intelligence-preparation-of-the-battlefield outputs. The intelligence section's early provision of friendly and enemy equipment recognition guides will assist every Soldier in distinguishing friend from foe. Understanding the capabilities and limitations of friendly force equipment will ease future planning for partnered training events in theater.

Also, leaders and the intelligence section should together analyze the terrain of their future area of operations (AO), and should prepare maps and graphics for anticipated training areas. Germany's Hohenfels training area, Romania's Novo Selo training area and Poland's Drasko Pomorskie, Miroslawiec and Bemowo Piskie training areas are among the most commonly frequented by RAF units. The brigade's geospatial-intelligence cell should distribute tactical maps of central Europe and the Baltics that clearly illustrate avenues of approach suitable for wheeled and tracked vehicles.

Furthermore, units should study battles fought on the same terrain to accumulate historical context and lessons learned. World War II's Eastern Front offensives, coupled with Cold War planning to secure West Germany's Fulda

Gap, inform today's strategic environment and concerns with the Baltics' Suwalki Gap.¹² Also, the Soviet Army's Vistula-Oder offensive in January 1945 serves as a particularly useful case study to help Armor leaders visualize a combined-arms attack across Belarus, Poland and Ukraine into Germany. The Army University Press even offers free virtual staff rides of the Battles of the Marne (1914) and Stalingrad (1942-1943) to facilitate historical analysis of European warfare.¹³



Figure 2. Map of NATO member Poland and the Baltic States, Suwalki Gap marked in red. Poland is bordered by the Baltic Sea, NATO member Lithuania and Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast to the north; Belarus and Ukraine to the east; Slovakia and NATO member the Czech Republic to the south; and NATO member Germany to the west. Latvia, not shown on this map, borders Lithuania to the north, and Estonia lies north of Latvia. The Suwalki Gap is an area of strategic concern. (Based on map from CIA World Factbook) (NATO membership list at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Member_states_of_NATO)

Tabletop exercises to study these battles can be incorporated into existing company and battalion leadership professional development (LPD) programs to build readiness. Because terrain does not change much over time, junior leaders' investment in terrain analysis is almost guaranteed to yield future dividends.

However, future Russian military operations in Europe will likely look much different than those executed in the past. Therefore historical study must be accompanied by thorough examination of emerging Russian military technology, hybrid warfare and multi-domain operations. Russia's campaigns in Syria,¹⁴ Libya¹⁵ and Ukraine's Donbas¹⁶ region provide insight into how the Russian military fights¹⁷ in the modern age, task-organizing electronic warfare at the lowest echelons and incorporating private-military security companies as force multipliers.

Within Europe, the Russian military has also leveraged well-coordinated information and intelligence collection operations against U.S. and NATO forces to discredit them. As such, even company-level training can yield strategic consequences if thoroughly exploited by the Russians. The battalion staff and company leadership should therefore explore how to best allocate the unit's intelligence collection¹⁸ and analysis capabilities across the formation and manage the unit's digital footprint.¹⁹ Rotational units may conduct exercises on NATO's eastern flanks not far from Russian training sites;²⁰ such proximity inherently puts friendly units at risk of Russian intelligence collection and information operations.

The unit intelligence section owns the lion's share of creating shared understanding of Russian military capabilities and vulnerabilities, but the unit should also liaise with the broader national intelligence community (IC), particularly the Defense Intelligence Agency and National Ground Intelligence Center, to obtain classified intelligence reports and briefings on the current enemy situation, Russian order of battle, hybrid warfare and multi-domain operations. These agencies may even be willing to host site visits for unit leaders or, at a minimum, participate in classified videoteleconferences to brief unit leaders on their future AO. Unit leaders could then maintain relationships with the agencies' European threat analysts throughout the RAF deployment and provide bottom-up refinement of their intelligence assessments. Such collaboration will only benefit the Army and IC over time.

The unit's field-grade leadership should also contact Army foreign-area officers (FAOs) at the European embassies in countries where the unit will deploy. FAOs can bridge military and political considerations, providing strategic insight beyond the usual purview of an ABCT. FAOs can coordinate briefings with the embassies' Offices of Defense Cooperation (ODCs) and defense attaché offices (DAOs) to complement those received from the IC. FAOs may also provide recommended readings that unit leaders can incorporate into LPD programs.

Basic deployment readiness for European mission

Although "readiness" has been the Army's watchword nearly a decade, it includes theater-specific considerations for rotational deployments to Europe. Company leaders in Europe-aligned units, therefore, can begin pursuing the qualifications and licensing necessary to mobilize for deployment. The standard qualifications for unit mobility officer, hazardous materiel, vehicle drivers' licenses and government purchase/travel cards should be supplemented by international drivers' licenses, training for contracting officers and disbursement of funds, and arranging for diplomatic clearances. Also, identifying Soldiers in the unit who speak European languages can inform manning for liaison-officer positions and build the capability to read local open-source material in the unit's future AO.

Lastly, studying successful previous RAF rotations²¹ and partnered training events²² can ease the workload of training management during the deployment. As institutional knowledge of these rotational deployments is still somewhat limited, leaders within ABCTs should look to previous units' experiences to inform the preparation for their own.

Leadership calculus

This great-power competition environment, with its reduction of traditional “combat deployments,” places rotational training events in higher regard. Tactical leaders face an incredible leadership challenge when determining how to prepare and deploy Soldiers to these events. As defense budgets continue to contract, the Army must retain strategic and operational flexibility to provide its stabilizing influence on global affairs.

Readiness to deploy comprises a large portion of this flexibility. While it is nearly impossible to be 100 percent ready at all times, tactical leaders must understand that while they are not actively deployed, they will likely be training or assisting their higher headquarters to train. They must understand further that while officers and senior NCOs rotate through units frequently, their lower-ranking NCOs and lower-enlisted Soldiers do not. It is the tactical leaders’ burden to shoulder this understanding and steward these Soldiers’ time in the garrison environment as able, with the knowledge that near-constant rotational deployments and training cycles likely lay ahead.

Communication of the long-range training calendar to Soldiers and their families can help manage expectations and prepare the force for increased operations tempo. Any type of predictability that unit leaders can provide is critical.

Given the constraints that an ABCT training cycle levies upon its members with respect to field time and time away from family, considerations must be made to fully understand the impacts of training decisions made. An unfortunate truth of being assigned to an ABCT is the necessity of longer-duration training events given their cost. Thus, company-grade leaders should maintain a pulse on their formation in multiple ways. Command climate surveys, family days and activities, and simple off-duty interactions among members of the unit can enable leaders to understand these impacts. Successful management of time at the small-unit level leads to more productive Soldiers.

Conclusion

Examining the position of junior leaders within armored formations today leaves little of which to be envious. They face a complex and uncertain operational environment, and a high-demand operations tempo through rotational deployments, and they are often left with fewer and fewer resources to successfully complete their mission sets. Yet despite these challenges, it is important to realize that they are surmountable, especially with good leadership at the tactical level.

Any preparation a unit conducts ahead of its deployment to standardize knowledge of terrain and enemy threats will only optimize available planning time during the rotation. A host of theater- and national-level experts, from intelligence professionals to FAOs, ODCs and DAOs, stand ready to assist ABCTs in preparing for upcoming deployments. Reviewing after-action reports from previous rotations can also shorten the learning curve and prevent mistakes that otherwise would be repeated.

The context and considerations outlined in this article are the first step in understanding why junior leaders find themselves in the situation they do. An introductory understanding of how junior leaders’ missions nest within America’s national defense and security strategies empowers them to better adapt to and succeed in today’s competitive and dynamic global environment.

MAJ Brigid Calhoun is a graduate student, Georgetown University, Washington, DC (first year of the Army’s Office of the Secretary of Defense/Joint Chiefs of Staff Fellowship Program). Previous assignments include team chief, Foreign Intelligence Watch, Headquarters Department of the Army G-2, Pentagon; commander, Company D (military-intelligence), 54th Engineer Battalion (Airborne), 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) (Airborne), Caserma Del Din, Vicenza, Italy; S-2, 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), 173rd IBCT (Airborne), Vicenza; assistant brigade S-2, 173rd IBCT (Airborne), Vicenza; and platoon leader, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Platoon, Company D (military intelligence), Special Troops Battalion, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), Forward Operating Base Gamberi, Afghanistan, and Fort Campbell, KY. MAJ Calhoun’s military education includes the Military Intelligence Basic Officer Leader’s Course, Air-Assault School, Maneuver Captain’s Career Course, Counterterrorism Analysis Course, Airborne School, Jumpmaster School and Combatives Level 1. MAJ Calhoun holds a bachelor’s of science degree in history from USMA, and she is a candidate for a master’s in policy management degree from Georgetown University. Her awards include the Bronze Star Medal and the Meritorious Service Medal.

CPT Alex Boroff is a J-2/J-3 public-affairs desk officer, Joint Staff, Pentagon, Washington, DC. His previous assignments include Joint Chiefs of Staff intern at Georgetown University's Student Detachment, Fort Jackson, SC; commander, Troop C, 3rd Squadron, 61st Cavalry Regiment, 2nd IBCT, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Campbell, KY; brigade planner, 2nd IBCT, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Campbell; commander, Troop C, 3rd Squadron, 16th Cavalry, 316th Cavalry Brigade, Maneuver Center of Excellence, Fort Benning, GA; battalion assistant S-4, 3-69 Armor Regiment, 1st ABCT, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, GA; and company executive officer, Company D, 3-69 Armor Regiment, 1st ABCT, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart. His military schooling includes Maneuver Captain's Career Course, Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course and Ranger and Pathfinder schools. He holds a bachelor's of science degree in mechanical engineering (honors) from the U.S. Military Academy and a master's of science degree in systems engineering from Johns Hopkins University. His awards and honors include the Bronze Star Medal, Meritorious Service Medal and the Combat Action Badge.

Notes

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

AO – area of operations

CAB – combat aviation brigade

DAO – defense attaché office

DoD – Department of Defense

EFP – Enhanced Forward Presence

FAO – foreign-area officer

FPRI – Foreign Policy Research Institute

IBCT – infantry brigade combat team

IC – intelligence community

LPD – leadership professional development

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NCO – noncommissioned officer

NDS – National Defense Strategy

NSS – National Security Strategy

ODC – Offices of Defense Cooperation

RAF – regionally aligned force