

Norwegian and U.S. forces during Operation Joint Guard.



DOD (Sean M. Worrell)

# Flexible Presence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

By D. SEAN BARNETT and JAMES S. THOMASON

**DATELINE WASHINGTON:** Sometime in 2001. . . . The strongman ruler of neighboring Sylvania threatened Freedonia, stating his intention to “protect ethnic Sylvanians.” U.S. satellites detected a buildup of Sylvanian forces along Freedonia’s border. In March the President dispatched a carrier battlegroup to the coast of Africa to deter an invasion of the fledgling democracy. The carrier embarked an air wing and a Marine detachment with helicopter lift. Overflights of the border by naval aircraft made the U.S. presence visible. Those actions and a presidential declaration that America would not tolerate the resolution of territorial disputes by force deterred Sylvania from attacking.

But by June the simmering crisis boiled over. While containing an anti-government protest, Freedonian police killed two ethnic Sylvanians, which led to escalating violence. Incorrectly believing that Freedonia would not request assistance from Washington in the face of such unrest, the Sylvanian leader ordered an attack.

After discussions with the Freedonian government, the President decided to provide air support. Drawing on a contingency plan formulated with host nation military, naval air began striking Sylvanian forces. The Marine detachment deployed ashore to reinforce security at the American embassy and help diplomatic personnel locate and evacuate some 500 U.S. citizens from Freedonia. In the continental United States (CONUS), Air Force bombers and a brigade of the 82<sup>d</sup> Airborne were placed on alert to back the battlegroup.

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Shortly after the invasion, enemies of the Freedomian government, with the support of Sylvania agents, attempted a coup d'état. Rebel military forces attacked the airport and other key installations in the Freedomian capital. With the turmoil threatening U.S. citizens and preventing their evacuation, the President decided to seize the airport. Elements of the 82<sup>d</sup> Airborne, flown from the United States, landed nearby and secured the area. Resistance was light and disorganized because most rebels were engaged fighting the government. When the airport was taken, Air Force transports lifted in Army reinforcements. The evacuation resumed. Then, with Navy air strikes hammering the lead Sylvania invaders and Army forces in the Freedomian capital, the Sylvania strongman halted his attack and began to withdraw.

By July Freedomia was no longer militarily in danger. A flexible joint presence tailored to the situation had initially deterred hostile action. When that failed, U.S. forces responded to terminate the crisis.

This article discusses why flexible presence should be our guiding strategic concept for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then explores its objectives within the context of the national security strategy and

how presence operations can achieve them. It concludes that CINCs and the Joint Staff planners should focus on conducting operations by employing situationally tailored force pack-

ages. Specifically, they should rely more heavily on air-lifted, land-based forces and break the Navy and Marine Corps out of their strict schedule of deployments to traditional areas of responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

### Overseas Military Presence

The definition of overseas military presence includes any military assets located or engaged abroad in noncombat operations. It is critical for three reasons. First, it promotes national security objectives. As General Shalikashvili noted in *Joint Vision 2010*, "power projection, enabled by overseas presence, will likely remain the fundamental strategic concept of our future force." Or as General Powell put it earlier:

*Our forward presence is a given—to signal our commitment to our allies and to give second thoughts to any disturber of the peace. . . . Economic power is essential; political and diplomatic skills are needed; the power of our beliefs and values is fundamental to any success we might achieve; but the presence of our arms to buttress these other elements is as critical to us as the freedom we so adore.<sup>2</sup>*

Second, our national security strategy has changed with the end of the Cold War. The old strategy required extensive assets deployed overseas in key theaters to contain the Soviet Union. But the new one of global engagement uses overseas presence to enhance security and promote prosperity at home and democracy abroad, to be advanced through the three instrumentalities of shaping, responding, and preparing. Thus it should be determined whether we still need overseas presence and, if so, how we should provide it.

Third, procuring capabilities for presence, and operating and supporting them overseas, is expensive. We have too many interests and too few resources to be everywhere at once. In this day of tight budgets and shrinking force structure, where force presence is needed we should provide it as efficiently as possible.

Based on the national security strategy, the Joint Staff lists the objectives of overseas military presence as peacetime engagement, deterrence, and crisis response. These follow from the objectives of our national military strategy: promoting stability through regional cooperation and constructive interaction and thwarting aggression through deterrence and maintaining warfighting capabilities.

*Peacetime engagement* includes interactions between the Armed Forces and foreign militaries: visits, exercises, contingency planning, host nation support, and humanitarian operations. According to the Secretary of Defense, it is intended to "influence events abroad that can affect the well-being of Americans."<sup>3</sup> And as General Shalikashvili stated in *JV 2010*, it confirms our commitments, strengthens capabilities, and enhances coalitions and multinational operations. According to the national military strategy, it also reinforces regional stability, relieves human suffering, and promotes democratic ideals.

*Deterrence* works by convincing potential aggressors that the costs of their acts will outweigh the benefits. It thus rests upon actors perceiving that we have both the capability and will to punish them. Different kinds of forces (ground, naval, or air) operating from different locations (in theater ashore, theater at sea, or the United States) differ in deterrent effects. The capability to punish is an inherent property of forces. But both the level and kind of punishment must be tailored to the parties concerned. Different punishments deter different parties.

Potential actors must believe that we are willing to use force. In the past, the perception that we would not has caused deterrence to fail, as when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. Our *actual* willingness to act will depend on how important an interest is to us and its probable cost in friendly losses and collateral damage. Even during

**global engagement uses overseas presence to enhance security and promote prosperity at home and democracy abroad**

Jordanian and U.S. aircraft during Air Expeditionary Force II.



U.S. Air Force (Craig Kiskiewicz)

the Gulf War, fear of inflicting excessive collateral damage shaped the use of airpower. Enemy *perception* of our willingness, on the other hand, may depend on the visibility of our forces in theater and our prior conduct. In Somalia, General Aideed attacked U.S. forces because he believed, on the basis of Vietnam and Lebanon, that we were not willing to accept casualties.

*Crisis Response*—the restoration of stability—is usually required where deterrence fails. However, it can also involve rapid deployments for deterrence, noncombatant evacuations, or humanitarian relief. Recent examples include Operations Vigilant Warrior (Iraq, October 1994) and relief efforts related to Hurricane Mitch.<sup>4</sup> Overseas forces have historically been the first to respond to crises, although forces in the United States can back them up and in the future may even precede them on the scene.

### Output-Oriented Measures

When considering how to achieve the objectives of presence, planners should think about force capabilities and the tasks to be performed—the output of presence—rather than the forces *per se*—the input. Moreover, they

should not feel bound by tradition. Shalikashvili suggested a more integrated means of providing presence:

*When you project power and you would like to keep an aircraft carrier forward deployed to be ready for the unexpected, is it really necessary to do that all the time? Or is it possible, in some theaters, during the time that you don't have the carrier, to forward deploy certain ground-based air together with some marines or ranger type units? You might wish to supplement with some bombers on alert or forward deployed so you can create the effect on the ground, if need be, that is identical to the one the carrier would project. And so all of a sudden you say to yourself, "Maybe I don't need to deploy the same capability all the time. Maybe I can build my forward presence around an Aegis cruiser and the air piece I forward deploy and put on the ground."<sup>5</sup>*

The following suggests the capabilities best suited for achieving goals of presence.

*Peacetime Engagement.* To assess the military activities most effective for peacetime engagement, we interviewed some fifty senior military and diplomatic officials. The overwhelming consensus was that actual interaction—dialogue,

Operation Assured Response, Liberia.



2nd Marine Division, Combat Camera (A. Ogunji)



55th Signal Company (Jean-Marc S. Schabli)

Egyptian vehicles exiting U.S. landing craft, Bright Star '98.

visits, exercises, etc., not just being in or flying over an area—is the key. Furthermore, forces physically present have a psychological influence over regional leaders that forces in the United States do not, regardless of how capable and deployable they might be. In addition, *continuous* military-to-military engagement, rather than a few large exercises and deployments, was seen as particularly important to building coalitions, maintaining communications within them, increasing the interoperability of American and

allied forces, and making foreign nations more comfortable with a U.S. presence. It was also seen as particularly effective in teaching officers from emerging democracies about civilian control of the military and human rights. Peacetime engagement is most effective with U.S. forces based in an area, although a large presence may clash with local cultures, and American bases and personnel are vulnerable to attack, as seen at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia.

*Deterrence.* Many potential enemies with varied values, strengths, and weaknesses confront planners seeking to deter hostile acts under a wide range of circumstances. Accordingly, no combination of forces and basing is the optimal deterrent in all situations. Moreover, political limitations on basing may prevent us from putting the ideal deterrent in place. We must therefore remain flexible.

If our objective is to prevent a direct attack on an ally, a land-based presence with significant combat capability is probably most effective. If the threat is not as grave, a tripwire force with the promise of rapid reinforcement from regional bases or CONUS may be sufficient. Deterring action without interposing U.S. forces between an enemy and its objective is more difficult. A punitive or retaliatory strategy does have the advantage of being executable by land-based or maritime forces present in a region or deployed from



Training area near  
Tongduchon, South  
Korea.

1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (James Messner)

**a strategy can be effective only if we threaten or attack targets whose value is at least equal to the objective we aim to protect**

the United States. But such a strategy can be effective only if we credibly threaten or—once an enemy acts—attack targets whose value is at least equal to the objective we aim to protect. In carrying out a punitive strategy we must not assume that enemies share American values and will react to our deterrent actions as we would. Acquiring in-depth knowledge of enemy political and social cultures is vital.

Location of our forces may influence an enemy's view of our willingness to use force. Troops ashore, because we will not abandon them in a crisis yet may not be able to rapidly remove

them, reveal a stronger inclination to use force and more commitment to our objective. But those in the United States, because they can go practically anywhere or not go at all, and are invisible to distant parties, indicate less commitment.<sup>6</sup> Those afloat, because they are nearby but can easily steam away, fall in between.

The kinds of assets we use may affect the cost and thus our willingness to employ them.

Airpower may cause fewer friendly casualties but more collateral damage. Ground elements, particularly light infantry, may bring more casualties but less collateral damage. A combined arms force, however, or one of largely one type backed by other types from outside the theater, appears to be the best option because it gives commanders a powerful set of capabilities to convince enemies we would use force.

*Crisis Response.* All services today have assets useful for crisis response. Forces can also deploy from CONUS rapidly, so commanders now have more basing options. To get the most from our resources, crisis response plans should reflect all the forces' capabilities and potential basing and deployment modes in conjunction with their tasks.

Today's commanders can deploy Navy and Marine aircraft by sea, send Air Force fighter wings and Army attack helicopters to bases in theater by air, and employ Air Force bombers directly from the United States. They can deploy Marine ground forces by sea and Army forces by air (in some cases straight from CONUS). These options extend our presence reach even with a smaller force structure. They also help overcome political obstacles to base access.

Current capabilities permit commanders to combine forces in nontraditional ways. In our scenario, a carrier battlegroup (CVBG) embarked an air wing and a Marine infantry detachment

and was reinforced by Army airborne and airlifting forces lifted by Air Force transports. In 1996 an amphibious ready group (ARG) off the coast of Liberia backed up Special Operations Forces evacuating noncombatants ashore. In Southwest Asia, we have a carrier battlegroup deployed regularly to the Indian Ocean, Air Force squadrons rotated to bases in theater, and Air Force bombers can attack targets directly from the United States.

Basing and deployment alternatives are important considerations in selecting forces to perform different military functions in various regions during crises because of their impact on force response times. Because we can deploy to overseas bases faster today, commanders have more crisis response options. Alternatively, considering all the forces that might perform different functions in different regions and how long maritime or land-based elements deployed by air or operating from CONUS might take to arrive and begin operations allows planners to judge the value of bases in theater in the first place.

One can also draw general principles from such assessments.<sup>7</sup> Air-deployed land-based forces will generally respond faster than maritime forces if the United States has timely access to a base in theater and the maritime forces are farther than two steaming days away. For example, a tactical fighter wing can deploy to Saudi Arabia faster than a CVBG can steam from the eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. Base access is unnecessary if land-based forces can perform a function directly from the United States. But without it, and if the function cannot be performed from CONUS, maritime forces are needed. These principles reinforce the notion that all services can contribute to rapid crisis response and that planners should consider nontraditional options to get the most from overseas presence and projection capabilities.

### Flexible Presence

The post-Cold War national security strategy of global engagement, service capabilities to conduct operations around the world, and the need to get the most from our forces in times of scarce resources imply that we should conduct presence operations differently. First, CINCs and Joint Staff planners should think globally about where presence might best support our strategy. Second, they should consider all our capabilities and plan presence operations using situationally tailored force packages to maximize our presence reach. Third, they should rely more on air-lifted land-based forces to conduct presence missions. Fourth, in accordance with thinking globally, they should break the Navy and the Marine Corps out of their schedules of deployments to traditional areas of responsibility. Navy and

Marine deployments should be flexible—part of the tailored force packages wherever required to achieve the objectives of presence. Finally, when thinking about deterrence planners should focus on the Navy and the Marine Corps, backed by rapidly air-deployable troops in the United States. They should exploit the abilities of maritime forces to loiter near a developing crisis to prevent it from boiling over without need for base access.

Reflecting its increasingly global interests, the United States is conducting more military presence operations. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century planners should look for opportunities around the world to further the new national security strategy, which aims to promote security, prosperity at home, and democracy abroad. By promoting stability—through peacetime engagement, deterrence, and crisis response capability—presence promotes all three strategy objectives.

Joint task-oriented deployments can help the United States use its forces most efficiently. Thinking joint and combined allows all the services to bear the heavy burden of presence. Tailoring forces for the task at hand minimizes risk without unduly drawing assets from other operations.

Today's land-based elements, ground and air, are more transportable than ever, and the United States possesses considerable airlift to deploy and sustain them.<sup>8</sup> Land-based forces transported by air can perform many of the functions of maritime forces. With base access and logistical support, air-deployed forces can reach distant theaters faster than maritime forces that are not already deployed relatively close by. Thus, CINCs and planners should rely on air-deployed forces more heavily. Base access is important for responding to crises with air deployed forces, but in the past fifteen years we have rarely been completely shut out of a theater of concern.<sup>9</sup>

Timeliness of base access is also important in that we may wish to deploy forces before our regional allies perceive that a crisis requires a U.S. response. Where we anticipate difficulty obtaining access, a maritime response may be best. Nevertheless, we believe our capability to deploy land-based forces by air remains underutilized in deterrence and crisis response planning. Greater reliance on air-transported assets will both increase our ability to provide presence and free maritime elements to perform missions that land-based forces cannot (providing offshore presence where base access is unavailable or performing distinctly naval missions). In the current environment where our maritime forces are deployed nearly to their maximum, greater reliance on air-transported land-based forces makes sense.



Evacuees from Liberia arriving in Sierra Leone.

DOD (Richard M. Heleman)

### Deployment Schedules

The CINCs and Joint Staff would increase the flexibility of U.S. presence if they broke the Navy and Marine Corps out of their schedules of deployments of CVBGs and ARGs to the three traditional areas of responsibility (AORs): the Mediterranean Sea, Indian Ocean, and Western Pacific. The scheduled deployments tie up assets such that any global deployments outside the AORs would likely violate Navy personnel or operational tempo limitations. The scheduled deployments are also inefficient when they include more force or different capabilities than are needed in theater or for too long. Not every situation calls for a CVBG or an ARG.

### deploying maritime assets globally and flexibly achieves economy of force

Deploying maritime assets globally and flexibly achieves economy of force. It permits use of unique qualities of maritime elements to greatest advantage. These include the ability to carry out naval missions like blockades and antisubmarine warfare and to remain at sea, free from political constraints (such as difficulty obtaining base access), yet influence events ashore.



B-52s after mission over Iraq, Operation Desert Strike.

1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Efrain Gonzalez)

Finally, flexible maritime deployments need not leave the Nation vulnerable in the AORs. We achieve peacetime engagement and deterrence by demonstrating commitment, not through slavish adherence to a deployment schedule. Moreover, we have substantial land-based capabilities in Europe, Korea, and Southwest Asia and can reinforce them from the United States. Additionally, frequent but unscheduled deployments may better signal displeasure to enemies. For instance, the operation of one CVBG in the Western Pacific is not extraordinary—it is always there—but the deployment of two near the Taiwan Strait in 1996 conveyed our concern over Chinese exercises and intentions toward Taiwan.

Because maritime forces can loiter offshore free from political constraints or base requirements, the Navy and Marine Corps, backed by air-deployable land-based assets in the United

States, may be particularly suited to presence missions oriented on deterrence. Maritime forces possess a variety of capabilities to punish. They range in visibility from being completely over the horizon to present ashore. And the United States has shown its willingness to use force from the sea. Thus maritime capabilities on the scene may be more credible than purely CONUS-based assets. They might also move in and defuse a crisis before the United States can obtain base access in theater and deploy land-based forces.

The Navy and the Marines, however, need not be everywhere at once, nor need the same units go to the same regions repeatedly. At times deterrence requires the striking power of a CVBG. At others it calls for amphibious power to control events ashore. At still others it demands the multiple capabilities of a combined arms task group.

Finally, each task group deployed to deter need not be large enough to handle all possible threats. Rapidly air-deployable land-based forces can serve as powerful backup to a maritime task group. If conflict erupts in spite of the maritime presence, as in our scenario, we could more readily obtain base access in theater and deploy land-based forces to respond. Even without access, Air Force bombers or Army airborne elements could provide backup directly from the United States. B-2s flying directly from CONUS recently conducted strikes in the former Yugoslavia. Using assets from CONUS to back maritime forces increases the flexibility of the Navy and Marine Corps to conduct in such operations. It thereby extends the reach of U.S. deterrence and furthers the goals of overseas presence.

Flexible presence—joint, task-oriented deployments to accomplish objectives using small forces forward backed by larger units from the

United States—should be the guiding concept for operations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It will maximize the utility of the Armed Forces for presence and enable the Nation to pursue its national security strategy around the world even without the resources to be everywhere at once. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The authors researched overseas military presence for both the Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces and the Office of the Secretary of Defense. See James S. Thomason et al., *Presence Analyses for the Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces* (Alexandria, Va.: Institute for Defense Analyses, April 1995); *IDA Analyses of Overseas Presence for the Commission on Roles and Missions* (Alexandria, Va.: Institute for Defense Analyses, June 1995); *Evolving Service Roles in Presence Missions* (Alexandria, Va.: Institute for Defense Analyses, August 1995); *Flexible Presence: A Concept for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 65<sup>th</sup> Symposium of the Military Operations Research Society, June 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Colin L. Powell, "U.S. Forces: Challenges Ahead," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 71, no. 5 (Winter 1992–93), p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress*, March 1996, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>5</sup> John M. Shalikashvili, "Readiness: It's a Balancing Act," *Air Force Times*, January 2, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> The United States may be able to make CONUS-based forces more visible, for example, by allowing CNN to broadcast images of the 82<sup>d</sup> Airborne preparing to deploy.

<sup>7</sup> In an earlier work, from which these principles are drawn, the authors considered three regions (Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and Western Pacific) and notional functions (emplacing an air wing in major regional contingency, noncombatant evacuation, humanitarian assistance, air defense, and strikes against short-term visible targets, point targets, and area targets). See Thomason et al., *Presence Analyses*, appendix C-2.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, William E. Odom, "Transforming the Military," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 4 (July/August 1997), pp. 56–58.

<sup>9</sup> See Thomason et al., *Presence Analyses*, pp. D-4-1 to D-4-3.