Send Armored Forces to Deter Russia

By Nathan A. Jennings

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In February of 2014, just six years after Russia invaded Georgia with heavy tanks, the world watched aghast as it brazenly occupied Crimea with light armored forces. Since then Moscow has destabilized Ukraine with an insidious, hybrid military campaign as the West appeared unable to prevent the expansion. Now, a year later, the U.S. Army and NATO are responding decisively as they deploy substantial ground units—in concert with ongoing strategies to politically and economically isolate the aggressor—to partner in former Soviet-bloc countries in Eastern Europe.

Called Operation Atlantic Resolve, the deployment of heavily armed and armored American forces, in particular, to threatened countries like Poland, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania decisively empowers broader coalition efforts to deter Russian advances. As declared by the commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, a U.S. unit which is permanently stationed in Italy, “by the end of the summer, you could very well see an operation that stretches from the Baltics all the way down to the Black Sea.”[1] More graduated than the unrealistic threat of massive aerial bombardment, less transitory than naval presence, and complimentary to intervention by lighter ground units, the positioning of heavy U.S. Army assets in proximity Russia’s borders offers the most viable strategic deterrence.

This unique capacity to counter Soviet-style intimidation stems from the proven tactical value of well-trained and resourced mechanized forces. According to U.S. Army doctrine, such units are optimized to excel at “sustained and large-scale actions in full spectrum operations,” while their “combination of firepower, tactical mobility, and organic reconnaissance assets” make them “invaluable to a higher headquarters commander in combat operations.”[2] Brigades containing tanks, infantry, cavalry, engineers, and artillery—all armed with large-caliber weapons, protected by thick armor, and propelled by tracked systems—wield a combination of lethality, survivability, and mobility unmatched in land warfare. Even as they possess immense capacity to defend against enemy attacks, armored forces possess ability to unleash devastating firepower against opponents.

These singular attributes justify why the United States’ decision to deploy highly lethal combined arms and coalition contingents not just to Germany, but across Eastern Europe, serves as an effective and enabling military component to NATO’s larger political strategy to block Russia. Moving beyond tactical equations, the messaging to both allies and opponents is clear: America has rejoined the game. Reversing recent trends of reducing the U.S. Army’s fighting presence in Europe to a less destructive wheeled and airborne units, the return of American heavy armor to the former theater of Cold War confrontation definitively communicates strength of national will.

This tangible statement of martial resolve—when employed to encourage political and economic unity
amongst NATO participants—holds immediate potential to bolster allies and intimidate opponents. On one hand large countries like England, Germany and Poland, in addition to other smaller and more vulnerable states that border Russia, will be assured by America’s deliberate stand against Moscow’s subversive designs. On the other, the revanchist Russian empire will find itself strategically frustrated, or at the very least operationally blocked, from further military expansion.

The effect of this armored network, symbolically dropping a cordon of NATO steel in place of the old Soviet iron curtain, holds potential to dissuade Moscow while synergistically enhancing other elements of allied coercive power. As argued by Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster—an ardent and influential champion for maintaining a robust American armored corps to compliment modern combined arms and joint forces—in his recent essay in Military Review, “the forward positioning of capable ground forces elevates the cost of aggression to a level that the aggressor is unwilling to pay and prevents the aggressor from doing what Russia has in Ukraine—posing to the international community a fait accompli and then portraying its reactions as escalatory.”[3]

The positioning consequently offers both risk and reward for the American-led coalition. While the Russian government will not openly assault American capital assets lest they provoke a major conflict, hybrid attacks or non-state interference will likewise fail to achieve meaningfully impact so long as partnered forces avoid compromising exposure in peace-keeping operations. Though no operation is ultimately predictable, and it is possible that Moscow will respond by socially and politically destabilizing partnered nations by inciting ethnic Russians or other disaffected populations, Atlantic Resolve is emerging as the most serious, but scalable, option for facilitating Western military involvement without provoking kinetic confrontation.

America’s leading role in NATO’s plan to establish contingents across Eastern Europe contains additional nuance. By dispersing only limited U.S. forces, European host nations and western contributors are compelled to deploy significant ground units to each coalition task force instead of relying on American largess. Never intended to match the much larger Russian Army tank-for-tank or threaten massive invasion, the concept allows an economized and invested alliance to physically and psychologically secure territory in a chess-match of strategic posturing. By proactively occupying ground, just as Russia did with Crimea, allied forward positioning severely limits opposing military options without risking rapid and expensive escalation.

Despite the United States’ laudable decision to place coalition detachments across Eastern Europe on a rotational basis, the current operation may prove only an initial step towards countering the Russian menace. If interference in Ukraine continues further action will warranted and justified. To that end, America should prepare to pursue the heretofore unthinkable: the establishment of a larger and semi-permanent joint task force, centered on but not limited to a consolidated Armored Brigade Combat Team of 4,500 soldiers and hundreds of tanks and fighting vehicles, in Poland under legally sanctioned status. Similar to deterrent effects won by the U.S. Army’s long-term commitment in South Korea, this partnership would reflect a normative and historically successful option in American foreign policy.

This forward positioning, which would compliment smaller rotational NATO contingents along Moscow’s periphery, would enable a highly mobile and potent allied force to foster enhanced partnership with a sovereign ally in acute proximity to Russian territory. More importantly, the logistical footprint required to support a robust combat unit with their full armament of heavy weaponry would facilitate, and telegraph, the possibility of follow-on NATO forces should further involvement, or scalable strategic maneuvering, be required. Despite these implications, the presence of a brigade-sized task force would not threaten territorial invasion of Russia and thus communicate only defensive intentions.
A robust and enduring partnership between American and Polish armies would also yield immediate political dividends. The establishment of a long-term Status of Forces Agreement—along with coalition training and wargames—would unmistakably signal America’s commitment to defending allies in Europe. Representing high-stakes geo-political brinksmanship, the move would compel Russia to choose between suffering an uncomfortable NATO build-up near their borders, halting, or at least lessening, its interference in Ukraine and elsewhere, or resorting to highly problematic escalatory measures. Were the Russians to cease provocations, the United States could then simply announce a staged withdraw to reward desirable behavior.

An entire American armored brigade in Poland, in particular, would finally capture acute historical significance. For Russians with long memories, Poland represents the pathway that Napoleonic and German invaders marched through to nearly annihilate their nation. For Poles who remember the brutality of Nazi and Soviet occupation during the Second World War, reinforcement by the U.S. military in a resolute fashion would conversely provide strategic reassurance. If the former nation could not abide a robust U.S. Army presence in such emotionally significant territory, the latter democracy would certainly welcome it.

Whether pursing the planned rotational system or more substantial and long-term posturing, America should respond to the Russian threat decisively. As famously declared by Dwight D. Eisenhower, “the hand of the aggressor is stayed by strength—and strength alone.”[4] Russia proved the truth of this axiom last spring when it forcefully sized Crimea, and continues to prove it as it fosters proxy war in Ukraine. Given such belligerence, America should continue Atlantic Resolve but be prepared to compliment allied political and economic isolation of Moscow with a larger, permanent, and symbolic military presence near Warsaw. If Russia chooses to destabilize European borders, let them find NATO tanks resolutely overwatching theirs. For the United States and the Free World, it’s time to send a resolute message that will deter the aggressor.

End Notes

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