

## Mobilizing for Major War

---

Olen Chad Bridges and Andrée Navarro

**ABSTRACT:** Given recent developments in the strategic environment and the heightened emphasis on readiness by senior US Army leaders, the Army must assess its ability to mobilize the force rapidly in the event of a major conflict. This article identifies some critical elements of the mobilization process that are currently deficient and require greater attention for the Army to execute a short-notice, full-scale mobilization.

At present, it is unlikely the United States could mobilize its entire military as quickly as it might like to. More importantly, it is unlikely the United States could mobilize its entire military as rapidly as it might need to in the event of a major war. The US Army has only conducted total mobilization twice in the last one hundred years. Both instances, World War I and World War II, are almost beyond living memory. Historically, the US Army has been unprepared when called upon to mobilize and expand. Even recent small-scale conflicts such as Iraq and Afghanistan revealed gaps in the US Army's mobilization capabilities and its readiness.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the National Commission on the Future of the Army recently highlighted the Army's lack of a total mobilization plan and recommended it develop one by September 30, 2017.<sup>2</sup> Given the increased emphasis the Department of Defense and the Department of the Army have placed on the mobilization process, this article discusses some key findings from research conducted by students of the US Army War College regarding the potential impact of nondeployable soldiers and the status of mobilization force generation installations (MFGIs).

Senior Army leaders have recently noted numerous deficiencies in the readiness to fight a major war. Some senior officials have gone so far as to say a “ready” Army cannot exist until at least 2020; others claim 2021–23 is a more reasonable time frame to “restore sufficient readiness.”<sup>3</sup> The central problem is the Army's present low level of readiness. For instance, Army Chief of Staff General Mark A. Milley testified:

---

1 Institute for Defense Analyses, *Sharing the Burden and Risk: An Operational Assessment of the Reserve Components in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Washington, DC: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2006), 10.

2 National Commission on the Future of the Army (NCF), *Report to the President and the Congress of the United States, January 28, 2016* (Arlington, VA: NCF, 2016), 80.

3 Army G-3/5/7, “Army Readiness Guidance,” US Army, May 19, 2017, <https://www.Army.mil/standto/2016-05-19>; and *Hearing on Readiness before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Readiness*, 115th Cong. (March 8, 2017) (Statement of Lieutenant General Joseph Anderson, Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, US Army; Lieutenant General Aundre Piggee, Deputy Chief of Staff, G-4, US Army; and Lieutenant General Gwen Bingham, Assistant Chief of Staff, Installation Management, US Army).

about a third of our Regular Army Brigade Combat Teams [BCTs] are currently ready for high-end combat against a nation state. . . . Our goal is to have Regular Army Brigade Combat Teams achieve 60–66 percent full spectrum readiness, and I estimate that it will take the Army approximately four years to achieve that assuming no significant increase in demand and no sequestration levels of funding.<sup>4</sup>

Former Army Vice Chief of Staff General Daniel Allyn likewise assessed, “about two-thirds of the Army’s initial critical formations are at acceptable levels of readiness to conduct sustained ground combat in a full spectrum environment against a highly lethal hybrid threat or near-peer adversary.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, only one-third of the brigade combat teams, one-fourth of the combat aviation brigades, and one-half of the division headquarters were deemed ready for combat in early 2017.<sup>6</sup>

Since a crucial step toward readiness for more than half the Army is mobilization, the Army has begun to reexamine its mobilization plans. Clearly, every delay in aligning personnel requirements with updated matériel, such as “long-range precision fires, air and missile defense, Armored BCTs, and aviation,” would increase the risk of “losing overmatch in every domain” to our peer or near-peer competitors.<sup>7</sup> This challenge has become even more acute because the Army’s senior leadership now believes “conflict between nation-states is ‘virtually guaranteed at some point.’”<sup>8</sup>

### Total Force Mobilization

For the past 14 years, most mobilization requirements were handled by the president’s partial mobilization authority, which can activate up to 1,000,000 members of the Army Reserve for a period not to exceed 24 consecutive months. A congressional authorization for full mobilization, calling-up all of the existing active and reserve components for the duration of a declared war, has not been needed and, hence, has not been tested.

It now seems conceivable that a full mobilization is more probable than at any time since the Cold War. During a strategic-level wargame held in November 2016, participants gained “awareness of related challenges and innovative approaches to mitigate those challenges.”<sup>9</sup> Scenarios concerning deliberate mobilization, contingency mobilization, and defeat-deny-defend mobilization revealed more than a few problem

4 *Hearing on Military Services Challenges Meeting Readiness, Modernization, and Manning under Current Budget Limits, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, 114th Cong. 3–4 (September 15, 2016) (statement of General Mark A. Milley, Chief of Staff, United States Army).

5 *Hearing on the Department of the Army 2017 Budget Request and Readiness*, 114th Cong. 4 (February 26, 2016) (statement of General Daniel Allyn, Vice Chief of Staff, United States Army).

6 *Hearing on the State of the Military, Before the House Armed Services Committee*, 115th Cong. 4 (February 7, 2017) (statement of General Daniel Allyn, Vice Chief of Staff, US Army).

7 National Commission on the Future of the Army (NCFCA), *Generating Force Analytics: Briefing to the National Commission on the Future of the Army* (Arlington, VA: NCFCA, 2015); *Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Army Modernization in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2017 and the Future Years Defense Program*, 114th Cong. (April 5, 2016), 15; *Hearing on Readiness*, 5; and *State of the Military*, 6.

8 Mark A. Milley, “Future War is ‘Almost Guaranteed,’” (speech, Dwight David Eisenhower Luncheon, Association of the United States Army, Walter E. Washington Convention Center, Washington, DC, October 4, 2016) quoted in Joshua Urness, “Milley Addresses Attendees of AUSA Meeting,” *Fires Bulletin* (November-December 2016): 4.

9 Ken Gilliam, “Full Mobilization Wargame,” *Collins Center Update* 18, nos. 3 & 4 (April-September 2016): 4.

areas regarding full and total response requirements. One of these is the status of nondeployable soldiers. Another is the state of mobilization force generation installations; most are inactive and might require substantial time and resources before they can assume operations.

### The Army's Deployability Challenge

During both World Wars, conscription enabled the US Army to expand greatly to play critical roles in defeating large-scale aggression. For both political and practical reasons, Congress abolished the military draft in 1973, and transitioned to a large-standing all-volunteer force (AVF). Despite early problems, the AVF became an effective fighting force expandable, when necessary, by no more than a partial mobilization. The all-volunteer force has not yet, however, had to confront a great power. That inexperience does not mean the force will not be successful; it simply means we are moving into uncharted territory, territory that will likely require full and possibly total mobilization.

As much as 40 percent of a mobilized total Army may not be ready for a specific contingency. Medical conditions may prevent as many as 10 percent of soldiers from responding to a conflict.<sup>10</sup> Another 13 percent may be Trainees, Transients, Holders, and Students.<sup>11</sup> And, 16 percent of soldiers, the minimum strength recommended by the National Commission on the Future of the Army, comprise the generating force “whose primary mission is to generate and sustain the operational Army’s capabilities.”<sup>12</sup>

Of the deployable force, at least 182,000 soldiers (18 percent) cannot be expected to mobilize during a major war due to the Army’s global commitments to combatant commanders in at least 140 locations.<sup>13</sup> In 2017, for example, 5,000 soldiers were deployed to the Middle East, 8,000 were in Afghanistan, 33,000 were in Europe, and nearly 80,000 were in the Pacific.<sup>14</sup> Although some global commitments, such as theater security cooperation exercises, would be reduced during a major war, not all of these requirements could be eliminated. Even increasing the Army’s size to 2,000,000 soldiers would mean approximately 360,000 soldiers would become part of the generating force.

Furthermore, should regional actors attempt to take advantage of America’s involvement in one major conflict, the Army would be required to support combatant commanders in shaping their respective theaters, as well as providing enough presence to assure America’s allies and partners.

---

10 *Hearing on the Quality of Life in the Military, Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veteran’s Affairs and Related Agencies*, 114th Cong. 6 (February 26, 2016) (statement of Sergeant Major of the Army Daniel A. Dailey).

11 Scott Arnold et al., *Non-Deployable Soldiers: Understanding the Army’s Challenge* (strategy research project, US Army War College, 2011).

12 National Commission on the Future of the Army (NCFCA), *Generating Force Analytics: Briefing to the National Commission on the Future of the Army* (Arlington, VA: NCFCA, 2015), 3–4; and Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), *Generating Force Study: Innovation and Adaptation in Support to Operations*, Pamphlet 525-8-1 (Fort Monroe, VA: TRADOC, 2010).

13 *Hearing on the State of the Military, Before the House Armed Services Committee*, 115th Cong. 1 (February 7, 2017) (statement of General Daniel Allyn, Vice Chief of Staff, US Army).

14 *Ibid.*

## Mobilization Force Generation Installations

Mobilization force generation installations are responsible for providing power projection, combat preparation, postmobilization training, and other capabilities that support the Army's readiness for war, contingencies, and national emergencies. Although mobilization and deployment are distinct activities, they intersect at the MFGIs, which are identified as essential power-projection platforms. These platforms "strategically deploy one or more high priority active component brigades or larger and/or mobilize and deploy high priority Army reserve component units."<sup>15</sup> Thus, MFGIs are doubly critical.

The United States had 25 designated MFGIs before the military drawdown in Afghanistan during 2014. Of these, 7 primary installations were federally-activated, state-operated, and designated for continuous support, which included combat training center events. The 5 secondary installations, which are inactive, maintained equipment sets and provided postmobilization support for reserve components. The remaining 13 were used to support postmobilization training for reserve component units. Indeed, of the 25 designated MFGIs, the Army now relies solely on only two active primary installations to train and validate active and reserve components.<sup>16</sup> Hence, without due preparation, there will not be enough MFGIs to enable the Army to conduct a short-notice, large-scale mobilization, such as responding to a national emergency.

To be sure, efforts are underway to define, identify, and prioritize power-projection platforms, aerial ports of embarkation, and MFGIs in the conflicting organizational publications to support no-notice deployment operations that would be necessary during a major war. But, more needs to be done.

## Low Likelihood, High Consequence

Admittedly, the likelihood of a major war is low. But, the risks are high and the potential consequences of delayed and inefficient mobilization are severe. The Army's routine, predictable mobilization apparatus has worked well during more than a decade of rotational deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. In the event of a total mobilization, however, the Army may be expected to double or triple its size in quick order, and the defense industrial base may be asked to respond in-kind.

When America is called to execute a war plan to defend against a great power, or a bundle of war plans to respond to multiple threats, an updated and robust mobilization plan must be in place to direct the command and control element as well as the rapid expansion of the MFGIs. The structure must identify and incorporate all of the force enablers—including the reserve component capabilities such as support groups, medical units, and postal units—required to operate the MFGIs. These units must maintain high levels of readiness to ensure they can mobilize on short notice. Essentially, a standing mobilization task force

---

<sup>15</sup> "Power Projection Platform," Global Security, May 7, 2011, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/ppp.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Headquarters Department of the Army G-3/5/7 Training Directorate (DAMO-TR), *RC Capability and Capacity Analysis, Line of Effort #3-Installation Capability and Capacity* (Washington, DC: DAMO-TR, November 18, 2016), briefing slides.

structure must already be monitoring readiness and ready to assume command and control during total mobilization.

Failure to prepare MFGIs, or to plan for the time needed to return them to operational status, will put the Army on the path to repeating the mistakes of previous wars and potentially losing the first battles.<sup>17</sup>

While the likelihood of a total mobilization may be low, the high risks and severe consequences of failing to plan for it are real. Mobilization must be a clear priority. The Army has not mobilized a large force that required standing up new MFGIs since 2003. The current reliance on predictable, rotational deployment procedures will not provide an effective short- or no-notice response in a major war. Deliberate planning efforts must be made to determine the proper training equipment sets and appropriate temporary or permanent MFGI facilities to support mobilizing units adequately. The current mind-set of the unlikelihood of short-notice, large-scale mobilization must change.

Assessments of the Army's ability to support a full mobilization must be transitioned to mobilization planning efforts based upon war plans containing detailed time-phased force deployment data. Limited defense planning guidance scenarios that dictate assumptions-based forces during mobilization planning exercises should be replaced by realistic force-strength data from combatant commanders' response-planning requirements. Comprehensive mobilization planning should include major war scenarios that involve competing requirements across multiple theaters of operation and warfighting domains to build a realistic, executable mobilization plan.

## Recommendations

Forces Command currently has the implied task of working concurrently with mobilization enterprise partners that include Army Installation Management Command, Army Materiel Command, Army Medical Command, Army Commands, Army Service Component Commands, Army Agencies, the National Guard Bureau, and the Army National Guard. Within this structure and as part of a new standing mobilization task force, the Army should designate several full-time mobilization planners who conduct full-scale, ongoing assessments to include examining the private sector's ability to expand rapidly the capacity of each MFGI. These planners could develop and maintain mobilization plans, which include a short- or no-notice mobilization plan for a large force, as well as plan and oversee rehearsal of concept drills and mobilization exercises to test and refine installation mobilization plans. Mobilization planners would also be responsible for capturing lessons and insights throughout the process to help the lead command prioritize mobilization, training, and deployment of both active and reserve components based on their priority of need.

Additional and periodic wargames, exercises, and simulations across the Army's mobilization enterprise—similar to command-post Warfighter Exercises that ensure corps, division, and brigade headquarters' staff can perform their wartime missions—should be

---

17 Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis (JCOA), *Decade of War, Volume 1: Enduring Lessons from the Past Decade of Operations* (Suffolk, VA: JCOA, 2012); and R. Jeffrey Smith, "U.S. Military Admits Major Mistakes in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Atlantic*, June 11, 2012.

used to identify gaps, seams, and challenges that can be mitigated. The Army should not expect the mobilization enterprise to be as responsive as needed if it does not routinely exercise or resource it.

Because total mobilization of the Army will not occur in isolation, active data collection efforts should integrate other services. Exercise Nifty Nugget-78, which estimated “400,000 troop ‘casualties,’ and thousands of tons of supplies and 200,000 to 500,000 trained combat troops would not have arrived at the identified conflict scene on time,” serves an illustrative example because the lessons and insights resulted in the *Department of Defense Master Mobilization Guide* (1989) and the Joint Deployment Agency, a forerunner to Transportation Command.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

With gradual and persistent attention, these tools can not only increase the information available to today’s leaders but also provide data useful to future decision makers: information from such exercises can help leaders identify, develop, and implement a systematic, parallel, enterprise-level planning process for total mobilization throughout the Army and update the Army’s doctrinal publications as well as support Defense Department efforts to update the *Department of Defense Master Mobilization Guide* used by the Joint staff, military departments, and other defense agencies.

Greater understanding of US military capabilities and limitations can reduce force-response times and lead to better support to combatant commanders. The requirement should be to expand planning perspectives, incorporating more scenarios in which there is active competition for limited military resources. To reiterate, planning for US military success should be based on information from realistic enterprise-level exercises.

Historically, major wars have been the exception not the norm; however, they are not extinct. The all-volunteer force has never fought a conflict requiring a full mobilization on short- or no-notice. It is, therefore, not safe to assume today’s Army can successfully prosecute such a conflict. The actual deployable size of the one-million-soldier Army makes it a high-risk force to meet Defense Planning Guidance requirements.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, Army leaders must continue to examine and to update policies for improving the management and readiness of its additional manpower pools. Realistic mobilization planning and exercises to mitigate low readiness levels and to reduce delays in operational planning timelines are imperative to success. Much more important, however, is achieving the capability to integrate and synchronize the total Army so it is ready for all conflicts, including a major war.

---

18 Danita L. Hunter, *United States Transportation Command, 10 Years of Excellence, 1987–1997* (Scott Air Force Base, IL: USTRANSCOM), JP 4-05 references the *Department of Defense Master Mobilization Guide*, as “the first level of mobilization planning.” See also, DoD, *Master Mobilization Plan*, 1.

19 *Hearing on 2017 Budget Request and Readiness*.

### Olen Chad Bridges

Colonel Olen Chad Bridges, a distinguished graduate of the US Army War College in 2017, currently serves as a military assistant for readiness for the assistant secretary of the Army (Manpower & Reserve Affairs) for training, readiness, and mobilization. He previously served in numerous positions dealing with mobilization at the Army National Guard Directorate and First United States Army Headquarters.

### Andrée Navarro

Colonel Andrée Navarro, a graduate of the 2017 US Army War College resident class and Army Reserve psychological operations officer, currently serves as a plans officer in the office of the chief of Army Reserve. She mobilized to Iraq and Afghanistan as a company commander and served in a multitude of positions in mobilization planning and global force management.

