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The Value of U.S. Land Power

Project on the Future of Land Power
CSIS Working Paper No. 1

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A Report of the CSIS Center for the Industrial Base

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CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Preface

The evolving character of war—highlighted by the conflicts in Ukraine and Iran, rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific, and renewed global competition—has intensified debate over the utility of land power and whether the land forces required to generate and sustain that power remain adequately structured and resourced for future conflicts. In response, CSIS has embarked on a yearlong Future of Land Power study to examine what lies ahead for U.S. land forces in an evolving global security environment and assess implications for the missions, structure, and resourcing needed as part of the joint force. The goal of the study is to inform the public, senior decisionmakers, military leaders, industry, and allies, and help drive the public policy debate about the future of land power and the planning required to sustain it.

The Army defines land power as “the ability—by threat, force, or occupation—to gain, sustain, and exploit control over land, resources, and people.”¹ The Future of Land Power study will explore the utility of land power, its contribution to deterrence and stability across key regions, and how U.S. land forces must adapt to remain effective in an era defined by great power rivalry, technological change, and all domain warfare. By integrating functional, institutional, and policy perspectives, holding public events throughout the year, and publishing two working papers and a final report, the study will offer actionable insights for decisionmakers and contribute to an informed national debate about the future of U.S. land forces in the joint force and in the broader global security architecture.

This first working paper explains why land power remains relevant. It presents the historical and policy context and proposes a set of characteristics of U.S. land power to be examined over the course of the project. A subsequent working paper will explore how land power institutions can be structured and transformed for U.S. interests; the study’s final report will make recommendations on the future of U.S. land forces.

Executive Summary

The roles and missions of U.S. land power are currently under scrutiny as a result of conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East and intense competition in the Indo-Pacific region. Meanwhile, the global war on terror and its legacy of long and large ground force deployments still lingers in the minds of members of the U.S. defense establishment, shaping both the actions of policymakers and Americans' views of their military. The proliferation of information technologies in the twenty-first century and the real-time accessibility of current global conflicts also provide a disorienting and confusing view of warfare, one that accentuates technology over strategy and destruction over success. Superficial impressions from conflict in Iran, Gaza, and Ukraine risk overshadowing the enduring characteristics of conflict.

To address these issues, this paper examines the utility and relevance of U.S. land forces as part of the joint force in the contemporary global security environment. It is tempting to fall back on axioms holding that only land power wins wars—an idea expressed by the historian T.R. Fehrenbach, who emphasized the dominance of physical control.² But land power is ultimately a tool of foreign—and sometimes domestic—policy. The employment of land power must correspond with the political wherewithal to deploy it and should be shaped in a way that supports national objectives. Moreover, the lines between domains of warfare are blurring, so land power must adapt and fit into a contemporary battlespace that demands all-domain capabilities. As the services face an attention-based political environment, military strategists and policymakers must adapt and reassert land power's *raison d'être*.

U.S. land power has certain inherent characteristics that demonstrate both its advantages and limits:

- Land power, through its presence and persistence, offers durable control, security, and deterrence.
- The land domain remains the decisive domain in which to generate enduring results.
- Land power possesses a wide variety of capabilities that demonstrate versatility and adaptability to accomplish a range of missions.
- Because land power is predominantly expeditionary, it is reliant on joint force capabilities and often allies and partners to meet its objectives.
- Land power is constrained by potential human cost.

This working paper presents a thorough examination of these characteristics. It starts with a historical look at the recent use of land power, presents current trends in warfare that most prominently affect ground forces, and examines the internal institutional perceptions that guide the employment of land power. Ultimately, the aforementioned characteristics underpin how land forces should adapt to remain effective amid increased great power rivalry, technological change, and evolving trends in warfare.

The Rationale for Examining U.S. Land Power

In December 2004, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld held a town hall at Camp Buehring in Kuwait. By that time, the war in Iraq was well into its second year, and over 1,000 U.S. troops had already been killed. At the town hall, a soldier asked Rumsfeld why service members were forced to pick through scrap metal and use ballistic glass to reinforce and “up-armor” their vehicles. The soldier’s question was met with loud cheers of approval from the attending troops. After explaining that the Army had concentrated resources in Kuwait to remediate the problem, Secretary Rumsfeld issued one of his now most-famous lines: “You go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you might want or wish to have at a later time.”³

While he faced heavy criticism for his perceived dismissal of soldiers’ safety concerns, Rumsfeld was correct about the situation. When a need to use the military arises—whether by choice or necessity—the mission is not delayed by waiting for the military to be ready. The military goes to war in whatever condition it is in at that moment. In Iraq, the U.S. Army had to adapt quickly to circumstances on the ground to protect the force and accomplish its mission; often, the pace of adaptation did not keep up with the pace of the threat. Preparedness is key, and that was the heart of the soldier’s complaint.

The country’s collective land forces, including both the Army and Marine Corps, are ultimately a tool to wield U.S. power. Some would say it is the tool of last resort. It must be prepared to defeat other militaries, exercise U.S. influence, and constantly adapt to the most current trends in warfare. In many ways, U.S. land power is also a latent force, deterring adversaries by its mere presence and credibility. The deployment and application of land power offers both risks and rewards and should be aligned with strategic objectives and synchronized with the joint force.

This paper does not address whether the U.S. mission in Iraq—or any other mission—should have been executed; national leadership should weigh the costs, benefits, and risks associated with those decisions. Land power is just one tool among many to pursue U.S. interests. Rather, this study examines why land forces remain a critical tool of the joint force, as well as how land power could execute anticipated missions to remain relevant. In short, this paper assesses the value of land power for the United States. U.S. land power must retain its capacity and capability to adhere to its core missions to achieve political objectives when summoned to do so. It is therefore important to first define these core missions and the current value proposition of land power, given the complexity of current warfare and the other means at the United States’ disposal to compel, influence, and defeat.

Some baseline assumptions govern the roles, responsibilities, and character of land power. Land forces are ultimately designed to defeat other military forces and exert influence through deliberate presence and persistence. But people are at the center of engagements, and the exertion of influence—in this case, hostile force—is ultimately a human endeavor. To remain viable, relevant, and influential, land power institutions must not only adapt to trends in current warfare but also retain best practices from past military campaigns and experience. The utility of land power is not a given; land forces must demonstrate how they can support policy—and overall U.S. interests—among the panoply of instruments that can be used to exert power. Land power must thus possess a wide range of capabilities and must be designed to meet a wide array of challenges.

The alternating use of U.S. land power to address conventional militaries and irregular forces since the end of World War II shows that it must be inherently multipurpose. Much has been written about land forces’ ability to wage large-scale combined-arms warfare; this role is often viewed as their primary function, with counterinsurgency and stability operations portrayed as anomalous. Yet this is a false choice: Land power must keep pace with modern conventional warfare while retaining an ability to fulfill other missions, even if those other missions are not a priority.⁴ Land power’s range of capabilities must alternate between producing victory over an enemy military force and seeking to stabilize or contain irregular threats and formations. U.S. land power institutions must retain an ability to apply force across the entire spectrum of conflict, integrating with the joint force to produce timely and appropriate effects for the warfighter.

This paper examines *why* land power remains relevant for the United States. A subsequent working paper will examine *how* land power is structured and adjusted for U.S. interests, including a look at force structure, acquisition, and personnel policy. A final report will make recommendations on the future of U.S. land forces.

U.S. land power institutions must retain an ability to apply force across the entire spectrum of conflict, integrating with the joint force to produce timely and appropriate effects for the warfighter.

The Use of U.S. Land Power Since World War II

The postwar history of U.S. land power employed abroad reveals a cycle: The United States is involved in a large ground-centric conflict; ground forces are subsequently reduced in the name of fiscal discipline or strategic reorientation; doctrine stagnates or is allowed to atrophy; and finally, a crisis demands the hurried reconstitution of land forces, often with significant costs.

The immediate post-World War II period conformed to this template. The Korean War demonstrated the need for land power almost immediately: When Chinese forces crossed the Yalu River in late 1950, nuclear weapons offered no usable response, and it was U.S. Army and Marine Corps formations that halted the advance and stabilized the peninsula.⁵

Eisenhower's first offset strategy of the early to mid-1950s was a post-Korea pivot that attempted to compensate for the numerical inferiority of U.S. ground forces in Europe relative to the Soviet Union. The first offset sought to leverage nuclear weapons to compensate for Soviet conventional superiority in Europe, explicitly deemphasizing land power funding in favor of the cheaper deterrence promised by massive retaliation.⁶ The calculus was as much fiscal as strategic: Nuclear weapons were an attractive substitute for the manpower-intensive formations that containment otherwise demanded.⁷ The U.S. Army adjusted to the changes by creating pentomic divisions, which incorporated tactical nuclear weapons and adopted wider tactical dispersion. Counterinsurgency and stability operations were treated as lesser missions that diverted resources and attention from preparing for peer adversaries, a doctrinal blind spot whose consequences the U.S. Army would rue in Vietnam.⁸

The intellectual and doctrinal revolution that followed Vietnam—also known as the second offset—was embodied in the Air-Land Battle doctrine, codified in 1982, which replaced more defensive doctrine and contingency plans for a Soviet invasion of Western Europe with an emphasis on seizing the initiative, deep strikes, and joint integration with the aim of blunting Warsaw Pact incursions into Central Europe.⁹ The concept emerged from study of Israeli operations in 1967 and 1973, as well as from the Blitzkrieg tradition, both of which demonstrated the importance of integrating precision fires with ground maneuver.¹⁰ Previous doctrine had been widely criticized as too passive, focused on stopping Soviet breakthroughs through attrition rather than seizing initiative.¹¹ Air-Land Battle prioritized deep incursions to strike Soviet second-echelon forces before they could reach the frontline, requiring unprecedented coordination between U.S. Army units and U.S. Air Force interdiction assets.¹² This coordination made Air-Land Battle an intellectual precursor to later combined arms, joint-forces, and multi-domain concepts. The role of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) as doctrinal arbiter created institutional capacity for sustained reform, but critics argue it also entrenched assumptions about theater infrastructure and extended preparation that would prove problematic in post-Cold War counterinsurgency operations.¹³

The Cold War-era forward deployment of U.S. land forces in Europe and Asia constituted the de facto instrument of deterrence, providing potential adversaries with tangible costs that no offshore retaliatory capability could replicate. Army formations positioned along the German and Korean borders acted as tripwires that raised the threshold for any assault, reflecting the painful lessons of the withdrawal of forward-stationed troops from the approaches to Seoul in 1949.¹⁴ Underpinning a credible U.S. security guarantee, forward-based land forces permitted key allies to maintain defense postures compatible with internal stability and economic growth.¹⁵ The forward deployment of U.S. forces reflected a tacit agreement: The commercial access and investment opportunities that flowed from stable, growing, U.S.-aligned economies substantially offset the fiscal burden of forward stationing.¹⁶ The broader record suggests that forward presence also suppressed intra-regional rivalries that might otherwise have generated costly instability, facilitating a degree of alliance management that over-the-horizon air and naval assets alone could not.¹⁷

The Soviet collapse removed the organizing logic of the entire Cold War force structure and triggered another (fleeting) peace dividend. The 1993 Bottom-Up Review (BUR) established a “two-war” force-sizing construct, requiring U.S. forces to be capable of fighting and winning two major regional conflicts simultaneously, a standard designed primarily for deterrence.¹⁸ The BUR also formalized massive post-Cold War drawdowns, especially after victory in the Gulf War. Thus, the cycle repeated: The Gulf War created a sense of invulnerability, unleashing a cascade of fiscal pressure, structural cuts, and deferred modernization—with doctrine left to catch up as best it could. Force XXI, the Army’s 1994 modernization initiative, attempted to envision future warfare and prepare the force for expeditionary operations against regional adversaries, yet that ambition was ill-timed against strong political pressure to realize a peace dividend.¹⁹ At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Army’s traditional roles were once again challenged by a new technological ideology: the notion that precision strikes, network warfare, and rapid expeditionary deployments could fully meet the challenges of a unipolar but fragmented global security environment. In the months before the September 11, 2001, attacks, serious plans called for cutting two divisions from

the Army force structure. The attacks and the subsequent demand for sustained land power in Afghanistan and Iraq reflected a renewed appreciation for what land power could provide.

The attacks of September 11 did not immediately produce a doctrinal revolution. The initial campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq were prosecuted through the lens of conventional enemy-centric doctrine, under the assumption that rapid regime change followed by light stabilization would suffice.²⁰ The 2004 National Military Strategy still framed counterinsurgency as a lesser-included mission within the broader spectrum of conflict, contributing to slow doctrinal adaptation and leaving brigade and division commanders to improvise without updated formal guidance.²¹ Army institutions resisted developing formal counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine even as operational failures mounted, relying instead on Cold War-era manuals and ad hoc adaptations developed by individual units in theater.²²

The performance gap became undeniable as security conditions in Iraq deteriorated through 2005 and 2006, with coalition forces unable to contain the insurgency.²³ White House intervention in 2006 forced the kind of institutional change the Army had resisted for years. The United States initiated a strategic shift to population-centric counterinsurgency, where the “clear, hold, build” methodology prioritized protecting civilians and engaging local political structures over killing insurgents.²⁴ Field Manual (FM) 3-24 Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies, introduced in December 2006, institutionalized the clear, hold, build framework and explicitly rejected purely kinetic approaches, drawing on British operations in Malaya, French operations in Algeria and Indochina, and U.S. operations in the Philippines and Vietnam to extract shared principles.²⁵ The 2007 surge provided a real-world test of the new doctrine; security in Baghdad improved noticeably, with declining attack rates and civilian deaths, and the COIN community broadly interpreted the results as validation of FM 3-24.²⁶

The force that emerged from Iraq and Afghanistan was battle-hardened but strategically narrow, ill-suited for the coming era of peer competition.

Some would argue that the traditional COIN narrative understated local political and socioeconomic dynamics, particularly the Sunni Awakening, which reflected tribal decisions to reassert their influence vis-à-vis al Qaeda.²⁷ The cyclical fatigue of stability operations also set in; by 2014, many senior Army leaders openly described a force that had become “counterinsurgency-only” and lacked proficiency in conventional high-intensity, peer-to-peer warfare.²⁸ Rotational deployments optimized for COIN degraded combined-arms skills, and procurement cycles were consumed by theater-specific requirements.²⁹ The force that emerged from Iraq and Afghanistan was battle-hardened but strategically narrow, ill-suited for the coming era of peer competition.

Two events in the mid-2010s closed the post-Cold War strategic interlude. Russia’s annexation of Crimea demonstrated sophisticated warfare that combined conventional forces, cyber operations,

information operations, and proxy forces to achieve objectives below the threshold of declared war in a politically weakened state. Simultaneously, Chinese expansion in the South China Sea signaled Beijing's willingness to use coercive action to reshape the regional order.³⁰ The 2018 National Defense Strategy formally ratified what these events implied: The central problem of U.S. defense planning was no longer defeating terrorist networks and rogue states but deterring and, if necessary, defeating sophisticated peer adversaries across all domains.³¹ This reckoning was badly needed, but it arrived at a moment when U.S. land power was structurally and fiscally unprepared to pivot.



U.S. Army Green Berets and an Army National Guard aircrew walk toward a UH-60 Black Hawk for the Apollo Nexus training exercise in May 2026.

Photo: Staff Sgt. Liseth Espinel Cuervo via DVIDS

The erosion of the two-war construct accompanied this reorientation, compounding the land power readiness deficit. The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) had already adjusted the standard from winning two simultaneous wars to “decisively defeating” one adversary while “denying the objectives of” a second.³² The 2006 QDR moved farther away from the two-war construct by incorporating irregular warfare as a primary planning scenario and assuming higher contributions from allies, reflecting how the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were consuming military capacity ostensibly reserved for a second major conflict.³³ The formal break from the two-war construct came with President Barack Obama’s January 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, which explicitly stated that U.S. forces would “defeat aggression in one theater” while imposing “unacceptable costs” on an aggressor in another (what analysts characterized as a “one-plus” standard).³⁴ The 2018 National Defense Strategy completed the transition, reorienting force goals toward the objective of prevailing against a single great-power

adversary.³⁵ Concurrently, the Marine Corps initiated a dramatic force redesign, cutting tanks and artillery to reorient the force structure toward contested littoral environments, particularly the Pacific theater. The early to mid-2010s were no less significant for the U.S. Army—dubbed a “lost procurement decade,” the period saw a reduction in active divisions, a loss of readiness for large-scale conventional operations, and stagnant or declining modernization investment.³⁶

The Obama administration’s pivot to Asia, announced in late 2011 and later rebranded a “rebalance,” shifted strategic attention from Europe toward the Indo-Pacific.³⁷ Subsequent statements from President Obama also reflected a deep-seated U.S. hesitancy to militarily contest Russia—a hesitancy that has persisted to this day, largely underpinned by Russia’s possession of nuclear weapons.³⁸ Measures epitomizing this shift included the rotational deployment of 2,500 Marines to Darwin, Australia; forward stationing of littoral combat ships to Singapore; expanded access agreements with the Philippines; and a planned Navy posture rebalance favoring the Pacific.³⁹ For the U.S. Army, the pivot initially posed an institutional identity crisis, as a theater dominated by maritime and air operations appeared to further marginalize ground forces.⁴⁰ The service responded by developing niches around forward-deployed fires, theater missile defense, and the Multi-Domain Task Force, an organizational concept centered on joint cyber and long-range kinetic strike capabilities.⁴¹ While initially facing headwinds, the strategic logic nonetheless endured across subsequent administrations, and the 2025 Army Transformation Initiative’s emphasis on lighter, more mobile formations and long-range precision fires significantly reflects the deployment demands of the Pacific theater.⁴²



U.S. soldiers fire an AT4 anti-tank weapon during African Lion 26 at Cap Draa, Tan-Tan, Morocco, in May 2026.

Photo: Sgt. Christopher Sanchez via DVIDS

In November 2014, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel announced the third offset strategy, pledging to sustain U.S. military dominance through new technologies and operational concepts.⁴³ Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work situated the initiative within a historical arc: The first offset used nuclear weapons to compensate for Soviet conventional superiority, while the second offset leveraged precision-guided munitions, stealth, and advanced command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) to offset Warsaw Pact numerical advantages, culminating in the overmatch demonstrated in 1991.⁴⁴ The third offset identified five technology priorities: (1) AI-enabled learning machines, (2) human-machine collaboration, (3) assisted human operations, (4) manned-unmanned combat teaming, and (5) network-enabled autonomous weapons.⁴⁵ The strategic rationale was the erosion of second offset advantages, as China and Russia deliberately developed anti-access/area denial systems to counteract the access and information dominance U.S. forces had enjoyed since the Gulf War.⁴⁶ Simultaneously, the U.S. Army's failed Future Combat Systems program served as a cautionary precedent for technology-centric transformation absent sound operational concepts.⁴⁷ Core elements of the third offset, including AI, autonomous systems, and human-machine teaming, have weathered changes in administration and been absorbed into the multi-domain operations (MDO) concept and the Replicator initiative from the Department of Defense (DOD).⁴⁸

Throughout history, U.S. land forces have participated in support of civil authorities for the purpose of stabilizing disturbances, providing disaster relief, and, more recently, augmenting border security. The National Guard has been present at some of the United States' defining moments, from supporting desegregation in Arkansas to supporting local law enforcement during the Los Angeles riots of 1992 to rescuing residents affected by Hurricane Katrina. The creation of the Department of Homeland Security in 2002 formalized the parameters of Defense Support of Civil Authorities, in which DOD personnel may be employed to assist federal, state, and local authorities in response to special events or emergencies.

Since the end of the Korean War, several trends have become evident: an institutional prerogative to focus on conventional war, overly ambitious objectives to remake societies absent a full understanding of their cultures, and excessive optimism in technology's ability to simultaneously reduce resource needs and secure rapid victory. Land forces themselves gravitated toward conventional war, often leveraging the promise of greater effectiveness through technological advances, while sometimes being forced to deal with messy "stability" operations requiring lots of manpower. Additionally, the threshold for ground force employment remains high; casualties suffered in any conflict become a liability for political authorities in power. Thus, there is a temptation to fall back on long-range precision strikes that avoid direct contact with the enemy. Technological development is slated to enhance militaries' ability to wield destructive power at a distance, but the effects of this shift may be fleeting.

U.S. land power survived and transformed under the first and second offsets to produce the force we largely know today. How current technological trends and geopolitical shifts change the structure, doctrine, and relevance of U.S. land forces remains an open question. A realignment of U.S. relationships abroad will force hard questions on how to project power absent traditional

access, basing, and overflight. Furthermore, amid political polarization, there is weaker consensus on what constitutes a legitimate projection of ground forces abroad. The historical record suggests that U.S. leaders should have a unified vision on the value proposition of land power before dedicating adequate resources to sustain it. The following sections explore this value proposition.

Since the end of the Korean War, several trends have become evident: an institutional prerogative to focus on conventional war, overly ambitious objectives to remake societies absent a full understanding of their cultures, and excessive optimism in technology's ability to simultaneously reduce resource needs and secure rapid victory.

Contemporary Warfare and Its Implications for Land Power

Over the past decade, technological trends and geopolitical realignment have converged to produce an increasingly complex and dynamic battlefield. In Europe, Russia's invasion of Ukraine both demonstrated the fragility of the previous international order and heralded the willingness of regional powers to resort to military force to fulfill political aims. In the Pacific, China has employed its forces to push the envelope of aggression just below the threshold of armed conflict by making extraterritorial claims in international waters, thus expanding Beijing's operational reach. The advent of autonomous technology, AI, and remotely operated systems is driving significant changes in the composition of modern land power. The war in Ukraine has ushered in drone and counter-drone warfare, a relatively low-cost but highly effective strategy that drives military formations to place a premium on protection, deception, and concealment while limiting both sides' ability to make large offensive advances on land. Networked surveillance has become ubiquitous along Russo-Ukrainian front lines, leading many to accept that a "transparent battlefield" will force military units to innovate new approaches in order to gain superiority over their foes.⁴⁹ However, as this paper examines later, there are some universal characteristics of land power that transcend technological advances and standoff tactics.⁵⁰

Land power must be adapted to this new environment and not be left to fall back on conventional applications. Given the casualties suffered over 20 years in Iraq and Afghanistan, political skepticism about the utilization of land power is justified. More often than not, modern war involves attempts to persuade, influence, and control adversary behavior short of direct conflict and occupation. Consequently, land power must retain a functionally oriented force structure that can operate in multiple domains and regions, equipped with capabilities that can complement and

strengthen the joint force. And it will need to encompass units that are ready to act decisively on the battlefield against a near peer, as well as units focused on promoting stability.

The war in Ukraine has ushered in drone and counter-drone warfare, a relatively low-cost but highly effective strategy that drives military formations to place a premium on protection, deception, and concealment while limiting both sides' ability to make large offensive advances on land.

Trends in Modern Warfare

War begets innovation. There is no better example of contemporary ground combat than the war in Ukraine, which has revealed new truths about the character of land power.⁵¹ Russian forces failed to anticipate the extent of Ukrainian tactical proficiency and political unity, uncovering clear intelligence failures. Ukraine proved tactically adept, acting quickly to deny Russian forces control of key terrain such as the Hostomel Airfield outside of Kyiv, which would have provided Russia with a convenient and close logistical hub from which to project force and seize the capital.⁵² From Kyiv to Kherson, the initial stages of the war were characterized by rapid maneuver until Russia curbed its ambitions, pulled its forces back, and escalated its nuclear rhetoric. Kyiv regained limited territory and the war began to coalesce along entrenched battle lines. At the same time, advances in autonomous technology, pervasive surveillance systems, and a contested airspace have led to a fight focused on indirect fires over large-scale maneuvers.

Similarly, U.S. Operation Epic Fury has demonstrated the changing character of land power from occupation or conventional attack to long-range fires supporting the destruction of Iranian military targets. It is true that traditional ground long-range fires assets, such as High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), are now being employed in a “shore to sea” configuration, neutralizing Iranian naval assets (echoing the Ukrainian Neptune missile strike that took out the Russian cruiser *Moskva*).⁵³ Additionally, the role of air defense assets is more important than ever in protecting U.S. and allied bases and populated areas. While these operations are noteworthy, each required staging from secured territory, enabled by traditional land power projection, demonstrating its enduring relevance for achieving strategic success.

There are a few salient aspects of contemporary warfare that are worth examining to conceptualize where future adaptations may lead and highlight how land power is adapting.

Standoff Versus Maneuver Warfare: U.S. air and naval dominance have long given policymakers powerful tools to execute at a standoff through long-range fires. However, adversaries have increasingly demonstrated the ability to challenge U.S. conventional air dominance while utilizing novel unmanned long-range strike systems.⁵⁴ Such capabilities have eroded the relevance of

doctrine premised on the ability to achieve total air superiority, requiring ground forces to adapt to uniquely hazardous environments. Accelerated target identification—enabled by advances in AI—has emerged alongside an expanded arsenal of available shooters, creating a need for new engagement procedures. This new reconnaissance-strike complex has fundamentally changed the composition of the close fight, due to the proliferation of options now available to strike at a standoff, using drones, missiles, and artillery, all connected by faster networks.⁵⁵ This has resulted in the “transparent battlefield,” where movement along the line of contact risks a much higher chance of detection and destruction.⁵⁶ Parallel technologies are converging, affording speed and precision in the sensor-target-shooter (i.e., kill chain) process.

Standoff warfare can inflict destruction, but if it is not coupled with maneuver warfare to take and exert control over territory, it fails to produce persistent gains. Ukrainian HIMARS strikes on Russian ammunition depots in occupied Donbas weakened Russia’s ability to generate offensive strikes, but did not displace these forces from Ukrainian lands.⁵⁷ To this day, neither Russia nor Ukraine possesses the operational art to synchronize the proper mix of resources to enable large-scale advances. Militaries face the need to develop new strategies for their land forces to retain the ability to maneuver amid these challenges since relative power still depends on the physical control of territory. Successful maneuver warfare depends on the ability to suppress reconnaissance-strike complex capabilities for enough time to allow for infiltration, exploitation, and a defensible gain of territory.⁵⁸

Air and Missile Defense: The proliferation of longer-range offensive fires executed across domains has led to striking asymmetry in protection—and a striking gap in air and missile defense. Simply put, it is easier to launch one-way attack drones than to defend against them. Combined with ballistic missiles and air-launched threats, these systems drive demand for large inventories of countermeasures and interceptors over an extended period. Nowhere has this been felt more acutely than in Ukraine, where the proliferation of relatively simple drone technology has forced a reckoning with traditional air defense methods and tactics.⁵⁹ While traditional U.S. air defense systems including Patriot and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense have proven effective at intercepting unmanned threats in Ukraine and the Middle East, their limited availability and high cost have forced Ukraine to develop more economical indigenous air defense systems.⁶⁰ Before recent advancements in weaponized uncrewed airborne threats, many armies, including the United States’, were actively divesting their short-range air defense systems to unlock funds for tasks deemed more mission critical. The proliferation of unmanned aerial systems (UASs) and their commonalities with preexisting airborne threats have highlighted the importance of maintaining affordable air and missile defense systems producible at scale.⁶¹

Moreover, the massive uptick in aerial strikes increases the chance of indiscriminate and widespread damage to the civilian population and infrastructure. The proliferation of drones not only impacts units along the front line but also reaches civilians far from the front. Airborne threats have contributed to the majority of civilian casualties in Ukraine; even when strikes produce no casualties, they “cognitively destabilize” civilian populations.⁶² In Operation Epic Fury, U.S. Army air defense systems proved pivotal to the protection of military assets, service members, and civilian infrastructure. While the U.S. Army understands this evolving protection mission and has

incorporated defensive tactics, techniques, and procedures into training for service members, it is far from fully developing and scaling the production of systems needed to mitigate the threat.



A Patriot Advanced Capability 2 Interceptor missile is fired from an M903 Patriot Launching Station in Koror, Palau, during Exercise Tenacious Archer 25 in August 2025.

Photo: Capt. Frank Spatt via DVIDS

Manpower: The wars in Ukraine, Gaza, and Iran have exposed varied approaches to manpower, and all offer insights into how demography, culture, and technological innovation affect countries' use of soldiers.⁶³ Today's conflicts still require human participation if the objectives center on control of territory. Russia thought it could achieve its goals quickly with a lightning attack on Kyiv to decapitate the Ukrainian government and install its own. This idea involved the use of Russia's existing standing army, a force that saved the most complex tasks for its professional contract soldiers. When this strategy failed and Russia had to regroup, the Kremlin ordered a partial mobilization of military-age men throughout the country.⁶⁴ To date, Russia relies on a series of monetary and status incentives to entice those with minimal economic prospects, especially in poorer regions such as the North Caucasus, the Urals, and Siberia. Despite the increased use of UASs, Russia is highly reliant on manpower to achieve its tactical gains in Ukraine. Russia's tactics depend on thrusting low-trained manpower into gaps, because its strategy hinges on occupation, even if measured in meters.⁶⁵

In contrast, Ukrainian strategists cannot rely on manpower alone to defend the country's territory. Out of necessity, Ukraine must offset its demographic disadvantage via technology. Despite an initial outpouring of volunteers, Ukraine did not make lasting changes to its conscription system until it was arguably too late and resisted lowering the conscription age below 25 despite pressure from

Western leaders to do so.⁶⁶ The Ukrainian government is aware of the need to increase recruitment, with some experts claiming that the country must recruit approximately 300,000 new soldiers in 2026 to maintain parity.⁶⁷ Ukrainian leadership continues to stress—at least rhetorically—that technological prowess, through UASs and sensors, can effectively make up for the manpower gap.⁶⁸

There is an enormous human cost to these approaches. Since it invaded Ukraine in February of 2022, Russia has suffered approximately 1.2 million casualties, with as many as 325,000 killed.⁶⁹ Russia has effectively sacrificed significant numbers of troops in an attempt to restore maneuver warfare—and in doing so has achieved a rate of advance lower than any combined arms offensive in recorded history.⁷⁰ For Ukraine, the human losses have also been staggering, but lesser in absolute terms due to its effectively defensive stance. This is an important reminder for the United States, which still has fresh memories of high (but nowhere near comparable) casualties incurred in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Logistics: There is an old cliché that amateurs speak of strategy and experts talk logistics. But whether strategy drives logistics or resources constrain strategy is a false choice. The two must be developed in tandem. In February 2022, many expected Ukraine to fall within days or weeks. Virtually no one expected a protracted, high-intensity fight involving the expenditure of thousands of artillery munitions a day; unfortunately, the U.S. industrial base was ill-equipped to meet that need. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza have offered lessons in how militaries must adapt their sustainment approaches to a contemporary fight on land. The intensity of both conflicts has greatly impacted the ability of logistical chains to provide enough materiel and has increased the vulnerability of supply chain infrastructure, putting reliable throughput of all classes of supply at risk. The advancement of standoff warfare has increased the number of long-range strikes deep into adversaries' rear areas—strikes capable of damaging supply depots (on both the Ukrainian and Russian sides) and forcing such depots to move further from the front as the adversaries' strike capabilities improve, increasing the time between resupplies. Locating supply and maintenance facilities further away from the front lines also inhibits readiness, as equipment in need of depot-level repair takes longer to reenter the fight. Emphasis has thus shifted to quick fixes on the front to maintain unit readiness. Contested logistics will only be magnified during large-scale combat operations, particularly in a potential Indo-Pacific theater conflict, given the tyranny of distance and global supply chain disruptions.

Ukrainian medical professionals have also adapted their triage and Level 1 treatment approaches to reflect the risk of drones striking medevac teams in transport.⁷¹ Similar airspace constraints may render existing U.S. aerial evacuation procedures infeasible. Even in air- and naval-dominant actions such as Epic Fury, mission success hinges on land-based allied logistical nodes in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar.

Artificial Intelligence: Contemporary discussions of warfare increasingly fixate on AI and its effects on warfighting. The advent of generative AI is accelerating demand for computing power across many combat functions on the front line to aid target identification and acquisition, process raw intelligence, and streamline logistical processes. AI accelerates the decision cycle across warfighting functions, but it is not a solution on its own. Any large bureaucracy faces an imperative

to increase efficiency. In the military, efficiency can lead to combat effectiveness and superiority on the battlefield. Advances in AI are revolutionizing the intelligence community as well. Whereas 10 years ago the focus was on producing intelligence, the enormity of information collected today now puts the onus on data processing and making sense of the noise. Information flow has never been the military's strong point, since its ability to collect information traditionally outstripped its ability to disseminate said information to where it was most needed. Artificial intelligence now accelerates the processing of such data and provides a means of outpacing the adversary's decision cycle. Given land power's continued importance for the joint fight, such capabilities could prove a powerful combat multiplier. But raw data must be correctly identified when uploaded and tagged in the first place, and databases must be regularly updated. While AI can "optimize the kill chain," it may not supplant basic human intuition and situational awareness.⁷²



U.S. Army soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division train with UASs during training exercise Ivy Mass at Piñon Canyon on May 15, 2026.

Photo: Pvt. Philip Banaszak via DVIDS

Institutional Perceptions

This working paper has thus far examined external trends in warfare that continue to guide and shape the application of land power. But how policymakers see institutions—and how institutions see themselves—says just as much, if not more, about their value and application. This section briefly examines the process of doctrinal development within land power-related institutions, the ability of these institutions to adapt to shifting external circumstances, and aspects of the civil-military relationship that guides such adaptation.

Increased geopolitical competition, as well as a political culture that demands quick and visible results, has raised the stakes for U.S. ground forces. Since the wind-down of counterinsurgency and stability operations in the Middle East, U.S. leadership has struggled to articulate and sustain a unifying vision that addresses the convergence of worldwide threats and stipulates how the United States should deal with them. The broader diffusion of power among regional powers and nonstate actors has created more friction points that spark conflicts from time to time, generating demand signals for the intervention of U.S. ground forces. Usage of U.S. land power usually falls into one of three general categories: deterrence (and assurance), combat action, and stabilization. Often, one type of intervention transforms into another. But the decision to intervene in the first place—and how to do so—remains extremely idiosyncratic, resting with national leaders who have fixed ideas and are influenced by reinforcing decision circles. The military is just one tool (the others being diplomatic, economic, and informational) that is available to national decisionmakers. Traditionally, U.S. land power has provided a deterrent value and has been projected abroad to protect territory or seize strategic terrain.

The Soldier and the State

Even if it is assumed that warfare is not fundamentally changing, there have been changes in how the costs of warfare are viewed. This section will examine some of the ways that the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marine Corps are attempting to transform themselves in response to evolving trends in warfare.

Domestic and political considerations exert constant pressure on the structure and missions of land power. A consensus emerged at the end of World War II that the United States should preserve the new order it helped create; different camps, however, disagreed on how this should be done, resulting in a shifting force structure. Policymakers have often declined to challenge this status quo due to the risks any such move would bring. With some exceptions, an examination of budgets and national defense strategies of both the Republican and Democratic parties since World War II suggests a mostly incremental and consistent approach to national defense priorities. Congress and the U.S. policymaking process as a whole are inclined to mitigate risk rather than place bets on a decisive trajectory of change.⁷³

The biggest driver of change and adaptability often comes from within the Army and Marine Corps services themselves, as current warfare trends are examined and change is pushed for with varying degrees of success. But the Army and Marine Corps are both institutionally predisposed to advance their own interests and relevance, which must be balanced with warfighter requirements and political considerations. This forces a necessary conversation about the relative value of land power to national security—a constant back and forth with policymakers.

Viewing land power as its own entity is a somewhat artificial distinction, as combatant commanders must choreograph all warfighting functions as a coherent joint force. Healthy modernization flows from a symbiotic relationship between warfighters who understand today's requirements and the service bureaucracy that fulfills these needs. Moreover, effective modernization rests on a common understanding of how to apply land power capabilities amid a panoply of tools—including

diplomatic, informational, and economic measures—available to national leaders to produce desired policy effects. When and how to deploy each tool is an ongoing conversation consistently reinvigorated by external events.

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Notably, the application of land power incurs political risk. Recent employment of ground forces does not evoke memories of success. The “forever wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan incurred thousands of casualties and undermined confidence in the United States’ ability to project land power and pursue interests abroad. Furthermore, U.S. foreign policy often frames its approach in moralistic terms, creating expectations that interventions be “just,” and implicitly setting a high bar for the employment of U.S. ground forces.⁷⁴ National leadership must define national interests and outline a strategic vision to fulfill those interests without taking for granted the costs incurred.

Land power’s traditional reliance on manpower, territorial control, and the close fight also means that it is the messiest of all instruments of force. Land power is likely to rely on humans for the foreseeable future, especially if control is prioritized. The future roles of land power should be aligned closely with broad-based national interests to retain legitimacy. But this does not preclude land power from offering other advantages short of direct conflict and control.

How the U.S. Army and Marine Corps See Themselves

Over the past decade, both the Marine Corps and the Army have attempted to refine their roles in order to remain useful. The Marine Corps has chosen to return to littoral-expeditionary operations in contested environments. The Army’s vision focuses on synchronizing networks to improve decisionmaking and command and control required for competitive ground combat.

U.S. military doctrine represents official instruction on how military commanders should think about warfighting concepts, while also allowing them a degree of flexibility to tailor operations as they see fit. Military doctrine addresses land power in both joint and service documents. Joint doctrine is the highest doctrine level, superseding service doctrine; in reality, however, the services always see their own doctrines as paramount.

According to Field Manual 3-0, the Army breaks operations into offensive, defensive, and stability operations, which can occur in either conventional or irregular warfare.⁷⁵ Army doctrine concentrates on enemy ground forces, seeing those as the fulcrum of an enemy’s ability to persevere. At the strategic level, the Army seeks to shape environments through presence, counter aggression during crises, and prevail in large-scale combat.

The Army sees itself as the dominant ground force working within joint, interagency, multinational, conventional, and special forces operations. Notably, the Army envisions itself as being globally engaged to help combatant commanders set the theater and improve regional security through cooperation, resulting in improved regional access. The Army adapts its response according to three operational contexts: competition below armed conflict, crisis, and armed conflict. Multi-domain operations doctrine centers its operational thesis on the ability to disrupt and defeat threats by projecting power through multiple domains, especially when joint capabilities are not available.

While the Army has sought to elevate its reach into other domains, the Marine Corps has focused on amplifying its existing joint capabilities in a specific expeditionary context. The Marine Corps plans and executes its ground operations integrated with air, logistics, and sustainment. It views ground combat through an offensive lens. Marine Corps doctrine emphasizes speed, momentum, flexibility, exploitation of gaps and success, and control of key terrain. While conducting offensive operations, Marines execute defensive, amphibious, and stability operations. Defense is viewed as a temporary measure, done while seeking to regain the offensive. Marine doctrine notes that forces may execute stability operations to support the transition to civil authority. This warfighting concept has not been altered since 2018, although ongoing modernization initiatives have driven structural changes across the Marine Corps centered on maintaining the advantage in littoral operating environments.⁷⁶

Current doctrine for both services offers useful glimpses into service culture and can help policymakers understand how the services prefer to fight. But service doctrines also rely on unspoken assumptions, since they are fundamentally oriented toward their own units and commanders. Reading these documents alone, it would be difficult for policymakers to understand the value of land power when arrayed against other military options and weighed against current domestic imperatives and political risks. Established doctrine also highlights the blind spots underpinning some assumptions about expeditionary reach against the backdrop of potential increases in unilateral U.S. action.

Current Transformation Efforts

In times of relative peace, tempted by promises of what long-range precision strike capabilities can achieve, proponents of U.S. land power must emphasize its continued relevance amid mixed political demand signals. Drawn-out deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan have not faded from political memory, creating a brake on U.S. interventionism. Yet political considerations and effects are often unpredictable and idiosyncratic. In the past five years, several security demands have intermittently required U.S. attention, resulting in varied demand signals on the country's military forces. These demands include Russian aggression in Europe, Chinese extraterritorial claims in the South China Sea, instability in Latin America, and U.S. border security. U.S. land power must remain prepared to fulfill ill-defined expectations and stay competitive alongside emerging threats and trends. The United States has experienced false lulls before. With the help of advocacy outside of the DOD, the Army and Marine Corps must continue to demonstrate their distinct value to policymakers in defending U.S. interests.



U.S. Marines exit an Amphibious Combat Vehicle to secure the beach at Hwajin-ri, South Korea, during a simulated amphibious assault as part of exercise Ssang Yong 24 in September 2024.

Photo: Cpl. Amelia Kang via DVIDS

The Marine Corps has centered its modernization efforts on III Marine Expeditionary Force, headquartered in Okinawa, Japan. While the Marine Corps initially designed its modernization to deny sea-based access by China, it has adapted its approach over the years, addressing education, logistics, and reconnaissance formations.⁷⁸ These changes have been met with resistance, principally from retired senior Marine Corps officers, who have questioned the speed of the transition and highlighted the risks divesting certain armored capabilities posed to the Marine Corps' survivability in a protracted ground conflict.⁷⁹

The Army introduced the multi-domain operations concept in 2018 and initiated unit-based transformation efforts in 2024, which were intended to reexamine networks, command and control systems, and the implications of increased transparency on the battlefield.

The Army Transformation Initiative (ATI), introduced in 2025, has three lines of effort: delivering critical warfighting capabilities, optimizing force structure, and eliminating obsolete programs.⁸⁰ The rapidly evolving nature of the battlefield—namely the advent of autonomous systems—has catalyzed the Army to align the demands of modern warfare with readiness levels through a leaner, more agile, and more lethal force. ATI outlines a series of objectives, including the following:

- introducing long-range missiles and modernized UASs into formations;
- closing the counter-small UASs capability gap;
- integrating command and control nodes with AI to accelerate decisionmaking; and

- canceling procurement of outdated systems such as crewed attack aircraft, excess ground vehicles, and obsolete UASs.

ATI is an ambitious restructuring effort that touches nearly every dimension of the force—headquarters structure, unit formations, aviation fleet, acquisition processes, and technological priorities.

Notably, part of the initiative tackles the Army’s antiquated process of fielding new systems. ATI’s Transformation in Contact program—which integrates experimental technologies directly into operational units during training rotations rather than sequencing development, testing, and fielding linearly—enables feedback loops between operators and developers comparable to the informal adaptation networks that produced both Air-Land Battle and COIN. Accelerating the “observe, orient, decide, act” loop around the acquisition process is promising, but its success hinges on the responsiveness of industry, as well as adaptive architectures that allow for evolving technology.

Inherent Characteristics of U.S. Land Power

“**Y**ou may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you,” the aphorism goes. The demand signal to employ land power—in whatever form—remains unpredictable. Despite having an enterprise dedicated to the analysis of geopolitical trends and forecasting, the United States often cannot predict threats and conflict. The country often does not see what is coming around the corner; as such, it would be foolish to abandon the competencies that modern land power offers.

Taking into account institutional perceptions and trends in contemporary conflict, this study asserts that U.S. land power possesses inherent characteristics, and that these represent advantages that are balanced with limits and constraints. This working paper puts these characteristics forward before making judgments about land power’s structure, disposition, and discrete responsibilities. Since geographic and socioeconomic factors guide the makeup and disposition of every country’s ground forces, there are some qualities that are unique to U.S. land power.

The country often does not see what is coming around the corner; as such, it would be foolish to abandon the competencies that modern land power offers.

- **Land power, through its presence and persistence, exercises control and security, usually over a long period of time.** This control and security is ultimately determined by humans, directly enabled by a situational awareness that only humans can provide. Given its ability to neutralize enemy land forces, U.S. land power can exercise more complete control over a defined territory than either air or maritime power. The potential deployment of land power creates deterrence by denial rather than punishment. It changes the calculus for adversaries via a more visible linkage to territory, threatening higher costs.
- **Political power ultimately depends on territory, and warfare in other domains depends on critical infrastructure and nodes on land. Because of this, the land domain remains the decisive domain for warfare.** The land domain contains infrastructure—such as ports, fiber-optic cables, satellite uplink stations, airfields, and energy networks—on which other domains depend, elevating the importance of key terrain.⁸¹ Control of this infrastructure leads to success. Waging war in other domains can also offer a degree of control and affect outcomes, but as long as political power remains rooted on land, militaries must invest in ground forces.
- **Land power confers a rich array of capabilities that make it both versatile and adaptable.** It is versatile in the sense that formations or units must be able to fulfill several different uses and missions; it is adaptable in that it must make widespread changes to doctrine and structure when exogenous factors force it to do so. For example, the modularity of brigade combat teams and battalion task forces has proven effective over time, giving commanders the ability to modify form to match function. This versatility also permits U.S. land power to be used in support of civil functions, such as border security or disaster response.
- **Outside of an invasion from an armed foreign adversary (or one of a few limited domestic scenarios), U.S. land forces principally play away games.** The disposition and employment of U.S. land power have traditionally relied on force projection, giving such power an inherent expeditionary nature. All force projections of U.S. land power rest on discussions of access, basing, and overflight provided by allies and partners. Absent this access, land power must rely on forcible entry operations in a contested environment to enter a zone of conflict. On one hand, these geographic realities present a limitation to U.S. land forces; but all of this could be quickly leveraged as an advantage if an ally or partner provides access and resources to enable force projection.
- **Finally, the use of land power has greater potential for casualties and therefore carries a higher political risk.** The loss of human life—or the threat of it—constrains the deployment of ground forces by policymakers. Current conflicts, including Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, illustrate the high potential for casualties involved in land warfare.



U.S. Army soldiers calibrate the sighting system on their M1 Abrams tank during gunnery training at Novo Selo Training Area, Bulgaria, in May 2026.

Photo: Spc. Thomas Madrzak via DVIDS

Conclusion

U.S. land power will remain valuable to the country and to policymakers as long as its utility in addressing national interests is clear. Historical examples since the end of World War II demonstrate the centrality of land power in warfare, as well as the ability of land power to adapt to contemporary threats. But land power is more than just a tool for winning battles—it can also shape adversary actions and prevent war when postured and employed with the right mix of capabilities.

Recent events and political trends have challenged traditional conceptions of land power. The U.S. population is increasingly sequestered from military service, yet the country’s political system increasingly demands quick, visible results without a full appreciation of the costs.⁸² Popular memory of Iraq and Afghanistan—which involved large land forces—discourages future deployments, despite the fact that those missions were more failures of national strategy than of the land forces that executed them. U.S. land power institutions exist under dual pressures to modernize and simultaneously prove their inherent value among other tools of power.

Battlefield trends reinforce the need for land power services to lean into their advantages while acknowledging their limitations. Standoff warfare achieves limited gains on the battlefield, arguably perpetuating conflict rather than ending it. Conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East demonstrate the need for increased capacity and leadership to protect civilians and critical infrastructure from airborne threats. These same conflicts rely on expeditionary U.S. logistical supply chains situated on territorial nodes in allied and partner countries. Although technology and AI have both sped up

the processing of information and expanded visibility, wars are still won by thoughtful leaders who deliberate on the application of manpower and focus on the big picture.

Yet U.S. leaders need to actively shape land power's capabilities so that it remains relevant as a practical tool of foreign policy, able to project power globally and employed in service of national interests and clear-cut objectives.

Land power's advantages matter because the United States will remain a global power. Land forces offer an inherent ability to provide security, control, and situational awareness. U.S. land power has shown remarkable adaptability and resilience. Yet U.S. leaders need to actively shape land power's capabilities so that it remains relevant as a practical tool of foreign policy, able to project power globally and employed in service of national interests and clear-cut objectives. Modern U.S. land power organizations must find new means to achieve superiority over enemy forces while producing sustainable gains that prove decisive in conflict. Ultimately, U.S. land forces cannot rely on nostalgia to prove their worth; rather, they must show policymakers that land power is best used to prevent wars—but will also fight and win them when necessary.

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