

Have We Finally Found the Manning Holy Grail?

Lieutenant Colonel S. Jamie Gayton

U.S. Army, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G1,
Task Force Stabilization, Washington, D.C.

THE ARMY HAS a history of attacking with a vengeance each challenge it faces—and conquering it. In nearly every major Army function, the Army identifies critical needs and then either develops in-house solutions or leverages the power of the Nation’s military industrial complex to apply state-of-the-art technologies to meet these needs.

During the 20th century, Army systems, such as weapons, communications, and logistics, among others, advanced by quantum leaps. The Army has worked hard to improve its capabilities through technological innovation and has been profoundly successful in all areas—save one.

The Army’s Achilles’ Heel

The Army’s glaring shortfall has been in the human resource area—the manning of its units. During the last 100 years, with varying degrees of resolve and resources, the Army has many times sought to transition from an individual replacement system to some type of unit manning system. The aim was to improve unit cohesion and combat readiness; however, all attempts failed, and the Army returned each time to an individual replacement system. The replacement system’s shortcomings have become a ball and chain around the Army’s neck; this primitive manning system hinders Army Transformation.

With force stabilization, the Army is set to cast off the ball and chain and completely transform how it mans units. This new manning initiative, developed by Chief of Staff of the Army General Peter J. Schoomaker’s Task Force (TF) Stabilization, will propel the Army through Transformation while addressing the shortcomings that led to the many previously

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failed attempts to implement it. Force stabilization might not be the Holy Grail of Army human resources planning, but it could be the solution to the Army’s manning problems.

To the question, can force stabilization work? Naysayers reply emphatically, No! Often without having seen or read an implementation plan. They say force stabilization has never worked in the past, and ask why we should expect a different outcome now? Are the Army’s TF Stabilization members any smarter than those who tried unit manning before, and failed?

Many reasons exist for previous unit manning failures. Although some attempts were well thought out, or had the necessary resources and environments for success, or were fully supported by senior leaders, none had all these ingredients at the same time.

But force stabilization is different. The Army developed it with clear guidance from Schoomaker to use fresh thinking to seek innovative solutions and crack the most hardened and encrusted of Army traditions—how we man our units. The mandate was no longer the ambiguous imperative, “increase cohesion.”

A military policeman is greeted by his family after returning home from Operation Enduring Freedom.



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Soldiers will only move when required to support the needs of the Army, leader development, and soldier preferences. This stabilization allows soldiers to stay together in teams longer, improving combat readiness, horizontal cohesion, and deployability while increasing stability and predictability for their families and them. For short tours, soldiers deploy and return to their installation, keeping their families stabilized during their absence.

Schoomaker wanted to combine the benefits of cohesion with unit readiness, stability, predictability, and continuity during deployments. He encouraged the Army to expand the number of desired outcomes, opening the door to a larger optimization problem requiring a new array of solutions. Rather than trying to force a square peg into a round hole and seeking solutions when one or more critical elements were missing, TF Stabilization developed a plan that aligned these elements to produce new outcomes.

Force Stabilization Reborn

Under former Secretary of the Army Thomas White, the concept of unit manning was reborn—with a fervor seldom seen in Armywide initiatives. Schoomaker renamed unit manning, calling it “force stabilization,” and made it one of his focus areas and top priorities for execution.

White and Schoomaker recognized the debilitating effects of turbulence on unit combat readiness and capabilities, and Schoomaker quickly attacked the problem. He stood up TF Stabilization at Fort

Monroe, Virginia, in September 2003, and for 7 weeks the task force focused its energy on developing a plan based on the results from a thorough review of past efforts. A cross-section of combat arms, combat support, and combat service support officers and noncommissioned officers kept one goal in mind: providing more combat-ready, deployable, and capable units to combatant commanders. The plan that emerged was two-pronged: first, to slow down and stabilize the force, and second, to implement unit-focused stabilization (UFS), a long-term plan to align soldier assignment and unit operational cycles.

The increased stabilization goal is realized by stabilizing soldiers and families for longer periods of time in CONUS units. Soldiers will only move when required to support: the needs of the Army, their leader development, and soldier preferences. This stabiliza-

tion allows soldiers to stay together in teams longer, improving combat readiness, horizontal cohesion, and deployability while increasing stability and predictability for their families and them.

For short tours, soldiers deploy and return to their installation, keeping their families stabilized during their absence. Increased stability and continuity enables soldiers to become more proficient in their specialties. They attend professional development schools (such as the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course and the Captain’s Career Course) then return to their installation. Leaders can then plan leader development positions in advance with no need to place new arrivals in staff jobs for evaluation before putting them in key positions. Stabilization also enables soldiers to reduce or eliminate the time previously spent getting accustomed to how a unit operates.

Stabilization enables families to develop deeper roots in their community. Children spend extended periods in the same schools, use the same medical and dental facilities, and participate with the same

peers in extracurricular activities. Spouses have enhanced career opportunities, more meaningful support networks, including family readiness groups, and develop a deeper sense of belonging to a neighborhood and community. These benefits allow soldiers to feel that their families are happy and secure with well-developed support networks to help them, especially during the soldiers' deployments.

Still, stabilization has challenges—the most glaring of which is a lack of continuity during deployments. Under the stabilization policy, soldiers can leave their units in mid-deployment to separate at the expiration term of services (ETS) or to make a permanent change of station (PCS), thereby undermining the training benefits and cohesion that stabilization is supposed to confer.

Unit-focused stabilization extends and enhances the benefits achieved by initially slowing down and stabilizing the force. As the Army methodically implements UFS across brigade combat team equivalents based in CONUS, UFS will align soldier assignments and unit operational cycles; provide dedicated training and ready periods, and ensure the continuity of unit personnel during deployments. For most UFS units, lifecycle management will align soldier and unit operational cycles for set periods (planned for 36 months). Cyclical manning focuses and schedules all transitions (arrivals and departures) into a 1- to 2-month “sustain” period, with ready periods lasting from 10 to 11 months.

Under lifecycle management, leaders and soldiers will arrive in a unit within a 2- to 3-month period, settle their families, sign for equipment, and prepare for a training cycle. Units will then conduct focused, uninterrupted training, beginning with individual and small units and finishing with battalion- and brigade-level collective training that will include a validation exercise.

With soldier assignment and unit operational cycles aligned, there will be no ETS, PCS, or other

Paratroopers of the 173d Airborne Brigade in-processing after a year-long deployment in Iraq.



US Air Force

Following the training phase, units would spend the balance of their 36-month operational cycle, roughly 28 months, in the ready phase. They would then rotate through traditional red/amber/green training cycles and expect to complete one 6- to 12-month unit rotation to an overseas location in addition to any local training and combat training center experience.

“programmed losses.” The attrition rate would remain at the historical 5 to 7 percent level because of medical, legal, and other unforeseeable events. This would allow training readiness to exceed current levels because highly trained teams can spend minimal time conducting sustainment training for newly integrated soldiers and maximize the training time devoted to advanced skills.

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Force Stabilization: Execution Risk

Complexity of execution, although not necessarily bad in itself, poses some increased risks. To maximize readiness, the Army must stagger the train and ready phases of its 26 CONUS-based brigades (including Hawaii and Alaska) over a 36-month

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assignment period that is aligned with a 36-month operational cycle.

To have unique capabilities available at all times (such as those of the 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions), the Army will stagger the train and ready phases of brigades within divisions across the 36 months, with fewer divisional deployments and more modular brigade deployments as part of divisional or joint task forces. This practice reduces assignment options for a soldier leaving a unit. Soldiers will select from a smaller list of units or locations entering the “build” phase that meet their availability window. Unit availability will be reduced by nearly one-third because units will be unavailable during their 2- to 3-month building and 5- to 8-month training phases.

Like any new plan that requires Armywide implementation, force stabilization has risks, not the least of which is acceptance by the professional community. Transitioning to force stabilization will require a huge culture change. The Army that routinely rewards the diversity of experiences that comes from more but shorter tours will become one that rewards speciali-

zation achieved by spending up to 7 years at one assignment (a type of service previously derided as “homesteading”). Another risk the Army is taking is that some might perceive it as having two classes of soldiers: the “haves,” who have been force-stabilized, and the “have nots,” who have not.

Other risks no doubt abound, but force stabilization is a solid plan with the flexibility to adjust to many external factors. Wargaming the plan produced some modifications to reduce systemic risks, but no amount of wargaming can eliminate the risks of changing environments and unforeseen events. As the Army implements force stabilization, it will have to reevaluate the plan periodically to adapt to changing circumstances. By doing so, the Army will move toward increased readiness, cohesion, and continuity during deployments and increased stability and predictability for soldiers and their families.

A Solid Plan

Force stabilization’s time appears to have come. Schoomaker has nurtured and overseen the development of a force-stabilization manning model that boasts a solid plan, leader support, adequate resources, and an operational environment that demands change. Although no one can predict the external factors that might affect its implementation, force stabilization successfully addresses foreseeable risks. Implementation will not be easy, and some soldiers might initially feel left out, but the benefits to the Army are worth the costs of the transition. The Army will be stronger and more relevant and ready. Force stabilization can make the Army’s manning system into a strength that leads change instead of a weakness exposed by change. **MR**

Key Elements of Force Stabilization

Stabilization

Stabilizes soldiers and their families assigned to CONUS installations for extended periods.

Improves combat readiness.

Increases horizontal and vertical cohesion.

Provides stability and predictability for soldiers and their families.

Allows soldiers and their families to develop deeper community roots.

Unit-Focused Stabilization

— Lifecycle management

Synchronizes a soldier’s tour with the unit’s operational cycle (planned 36 months).

Increases horizontal and vertical cohesion.

Maximizes combat readiness.

Minimizes PCS and ETS attrition during operational cycles.

— Cyclic management

Focuses unit arrivals and departures to 1 to 2 months of a 12-month cycle, “normalizing” the training cycle for units.

Enhances the continuity of operations.

Limits training to sustainment periods.