

Undercutting the Strategy:
US Troop Withdrawals from Germany and Europe

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14. ABSTRACT On 15 June 2020, former President Donald Trump announced plans to withdraw U.S. troops from Europe. Part of this plan, as announced by administration officials, called for the full withdrawal of the Army's 2 nd Cavalry Regiment from the European theater. In February of 2021, Secretary of Defense Austin's Pentagon halted President Trump's plan and called for a review of the troop withdrawal plan. In support of the SECDEF's holistic review of the global force posture, this paper considers some of the costs, monetary and otherwise, for pursuing the plans announced by the Trump Administration. Ultimately, this paper recommends that not only should 2CR remain within the European theater but that it should also be converted back into an armored formation to enhance US and NATO allied deterrence of Russian aggression.					
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The U.S. and NATO at a crossroads... again

In the spring of 1975, a former United States Assistant Secretary of Defense wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* condemning contemporary political arguments against the continued forward basing of United States troops in Europe. In his view, the arguments at the time rested on a misunderstanding of the fiscal costs associated with the country's commitments to the NATO alliance, and framed his opponents' arguments as, "(1) that we must reorient national priorities to domestic human concerns, (2) that our European allies aren't doing their fair share, and (3) that our military spending in Europe causes an insupportable drain on our international balance of payments."¹ He concluded that bluntly, "As is so often the case in large issues of public policy, beliefs long outlive the facts that gave them birth."² Forty-five years later, with only a fraction of the number of troops forward stationed in the European theater,³ the United States finds itself at a sort of crossroads in its relationship with NATO where the same familiar arguments are being made against a continued U.S. military presence in Europe.

On June 15, 2020, former President Donald Trump announced a cut of approximately 10,000 United States troops from Germany.⁴ Within six weeks, then Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, had upped that number to approximately 12,000 troops with an estimated relocation cost in the "single-digit billions."⁵ Secretary Esper sought to justify the moves by stating that they provide the United States with greater

¹ Enthoven, Alain C. "U.S. Forces in Europe: How Many? Doing what?" *Foreign Affairs* 53, no. 3 (April, 1975): 518.

² Ibid.

³ US Troops in Europe numbered at around 320,000 in 1975, versus approximately 63,000 in 2020.

⁴ Burns, Robert. "Trump Announces Major US Troop Cut in 'delinquent' Germany." Associated Press. Accessed Aug 28, 2020.

⁵ Gramer, Robbie and Jack Detsch. "Trump Undercuts Pentagon Over Germany Troop Withdrawal." *Foreign Policy*, 29 July, 2020.

strategic flexibility. However, President Trump almost immediately negated the Secretary's claim by pronouncing the moves as a form of economic punishment against the German government for failing to reach the 2% target of GDP in defense spending and 20% of the defense budget on equipment.⁶

Details on the plan remained sparse, but 6,400 troops, including the entire U.S. Army's 2nd Cavalry Regiment (2CR), were slated to exit the European theater and return to the United States, while the remaining 5,600 will relocate to other countries in Europe.^{7 8} Fortunately, under the current administration, the plan has been halted for further review and consideration by Secretary of Defense Austin.⁹ This policy review provides the opportunity to consider the decision further and its implications for U.S. strategy and relationships in the region. If, however, the Department of Defense determines to move forward with President Trump's original intention to withdraw 12,000 troops from Germany, with the entire 2CR completely exiting the European theater, the department will decisively hamper the overall U.S. strategy to deter Russian aggression in Europe. Furthermore, this decision would: incur large expenses to the United States with minimal benefit, ignore the difficulties this action will impose upon the Combatant and Service Component Commanders who are trying to accomplish their "set the theater" duties, and actively facilitate Russia's objective to create a crisis of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gordon, Michael R. and Nancy A. Youssef. "Pentagon to Move nearly 12,000 U.S. Troops from Germany; Military also Plans to Relocate its Major European Headquarters to Belgium and Send F-16 Fighters to Italy, in an Overhaul that some Say could Hamper Deterrence Against Russia." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Jul 29, 2020.

⁸ Specifically, the Air Force will relocate its F16s to an air base in Aviano, Italy, and the United States European Command Headquarters, currently in Stuttgart, along with the Special Operations Command Europe, will relocate to Mons, Belgium.

⁹ Cooper, Helene. "Biden Freezes Trump's Withdrawal of 12,000 Troops From Germany." *New York Times (Online)*, Feb 4, 2021.

legitimacy for NATO. Therefore, this troop restationing decision only serves to undercut stated U.S. objectives in the 2018 National Defense Strategy.

Restationing Troops: A costly endeavor

President Trump's Pentagon staff figured the math for this "boots on the ground" reduction in Germany would cost American taxpayers between \$6 and \$8 billion.¹⁰ To put that number in context, it is more than 21 times greater than EUCOM's FY2020 MILCON budget.¹¹ ¹² That it is an unnecessary move is underscored by the aforementioned admission that President Trump wanted to punish Germany for not meeting NATO's 2% and 20% defense budgeting guidelines. That only four other NATO countries meet the budgeting guidelines did not figure into the equation. This is evidenced by the fact that of the 5,600 troops expected to remain in theater, zero of them would be moved into one of the countries which meet those guidelines (Latvia, Poland, Romania, and the United Kingdom).¹³

In addition to the initial cost of moving these troops would be the costs incurred by the forward rotation of Stryker units back into Europe in the Black Sea Region, which then Secretary Esper said would follow-on from 2CR's restationing to the United States.¹⁴ In 2017, the U.S. Army War College concluded a study on the cost of the Army's current rotational model of deploying Armored Brigade Combat Teams (ABCT) from Fort Hood, TX to Poland for 9-months at a time, versus the projected costs of permanently forward stationing an ABCT in Germany. The study revealed that the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Comptroller. *European Deterrence Initiative, Department of Defense Budget, FY2020*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2019. 1.

¹² EUCOM's FY2020 MILCON budget request was \$374.3mil.

¹³ Wood, Dakota L. *2020 Index of U.S. Military Strength*. Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2020. Chart 2, 105.

¹⁴ Gordon and Youssef.

average expenditure to rotate a BCT forward costs American taxpayers \$135mil more per year than it would to restation one of those ABCTs in Germany permanently.¹⁵ Admittedly, the 2CR is equipped with Strykers and not M1s and, therefore, is a lighter formation than an ABCT. Logically, 2CR would then incur lesser transportation costs moving to and from the European theater; however, the point remains that rotating forces through versus permanent stationing in theater has never proven to be an effective cost-saving measure, making this rotation more expensive than leaving the unit in place.

Only a 2003 RAND Arroyo study contends that the U.S. would incur greater costs from forward stationing an entire brigade. However, RAND based those results on the flawed assumption that brigades would only rotate personnel and not their equipment forward, falling in on equipment drawn from an Army Prepositioned Stock (APS) site.¹⁶ In six years of ABCT rotations, that assumption has never materialized into reality. Even when the 1st ABCT of 3rd Infantry Division turned in its equipment set to establish an ABCT-focused APS site for Europe in 2015, the Army still required all future ABCTs to rotate through using their organic equipment.¹⁷

Setting the Theater: A complex endeavor

The immediate cost of this force realignment is not, however, the only consideration. United States Army Europe's mission is "to provide ready, combat-credible land forces to, and set the essential conditions for, U.S. European Command

¹⁵ Deni, John. *Rotational Deployments Vs. Forward Stationing: How can the Army Achieve Assurance and Deterrence Efficiently and Effectively?*. Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2017. 22.

¹⁶ Ibid, 10.

¹⁷ Honeycutt, Rodney H., Richard A. Bezold, Robin T. Dothager and Robin T. Dothager. "Establishing Europe's Army Pre-Positioned Stocks". Accessed Sep 25, 2020. https://www.army.mil/article/192455/establishing_europes_army_pre_positioned_stocks.

(USEUCOM) and NATO to deter aggression from any potential adversary in the European theater.”¹⁸ USAREUR’s mission is already difficult. In a typical year, the command supports more than 50 multinational exercises, and in 2019 it did so across 45 different countries.¹⁹ At present, the USEUCOM has only two large Army ground combat formations in Europe, the previously mentioned 2CR and the 173rd Airborne Brigade. Withdrawing half of the Army’s ground combat power will make it inordinately difficult for the USAREUR Commander and Staff to fulfill their set the theater requirements supporting USEUCOM.

Setting the theater refers to a multitude of activities in which the Service Component Commanders ensure that their theater is fully prepared to accept an influx of American and allied forces in the event of an escalation towards conventional war. More specifically, it represents the necessary logistics preparations such as seaport and airport opening for reception and staging of military equipment and personnel. Additionally, the phrase covers the necessary coordination for onward movement using major transportation infrastructure across many host nations to ensure that U.S. equipment and personnel can quickly move to the frontlines of battle. Further, it involves preparing the security environment to ensure adversarial forces do not have freedom of maneuver in the Joint Security Area, where they could potentially disrupt U.S. forces while they build combat power in the theater. Setting the theater also requires the service component commands to continuously build and maintain partner relationships

¹⁸ United States Army Europe. "U.S. Army Europe Mission Statement." Accessed Sep 25, 2020. <https://www.eur.army.mil/Mission-History/>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

with host nation countries across the theater to ensure a smooth transition between competition and conflict as U.S. forces integrate with partners and allies.

The immediate and most obvious impact is that USAREUR and, by extension, USEUCOM would be less “combat-credible” in the land domain if this plan were to be put into effect. Still, there are other, less obvious, downwind effects this decision has on the ability of USAREUR to adequately fulfill its *raison d’etre*. When 4,500 Soldiers exit the European theater, the ASCC Commander’s requirement to support multinational exercises does not simply disappear. It remains a significant part of “setting the theater” and gives vital practical experience in some of the most complex functions of partner integration. If 2CR leaves the theater, their role in each of the 50+ USAREUR-supported annual exercises will not simply disappear with them. The USAREUR staff will then redistribute those requirements across the other forces which remain in the theater. Not every requirement leveraged on a Stryker formation will be a 1:1 transfer to non-Stryker formations. Still, oftentimes these requirements are roleplaying or Observer Coach/Trainer requirements to evaluate the exercise participants, many of which can ostensibly be moved across formation types. Every single one of these transferable requirements could now be leveraged against the Theater Intelligence, Signal, or Sustainment commands, which are at present already at capacity or overleveraged in exercise support at the expense of their competition phase missions. This rebalancing of duties will only further reduce their capacities to secure the theater against adversary collection and disruption; ensure and secure reliable communications throughout the continent; and plan and execute assured logistics support throughout the theater and across international borders. Not only will the ASCC have less credible combat power

immediately on tap, but its ability to sufficiently “set the essential conditions” will now come into question. In plain language, the decision to remove 2CR from the European theater detracts from the readiness of the units that remain behind. So, how then can USAREUR effectively deter adversarial aggression when it has a limited capacity to provide immediate crisis response and a degraded ability to ensure the preparations are in place for other forces to safely make it into the theater in the event of escalations toward conflict?

Finally, the 2CR is frequently USAREUR’s lead unit for the American-led, multinational, Enhanced Forward Presence, Battle Group-Poland, one of NATO’s “trip-wire” units in the Baltic Region. As a forward-stationed brigade already in theater, this is a natural role for it to assume. At present, no other combat unit is better positioned to have permanent partner relationships with Polish ground forces. If 2CR is forced to leave the theater, this role will have to be assumed by some other U.S. formation in a rotational manner. Units rotating in from outside of the theater to perform this function add an unnecessary complication, incur additional costs to U.S. taxpayers, and come at the expense of building institutional knowledge, expertise, and habitual relationships with allies and partners in the theater which are essential for partner integration.

Dis-integrating NATO: A Russian endeavor

The United States 2018 National Defense Strategy states, “The willingness of rivals to abandon aggression will depend on their perception of U.S. strength and the vitality of our alliances and partnerships.”²⁰ Interestingly, but not surprisingly, United States Army doctrine does not contain the word “retreat” as a possible maneuver of

²⁰ Mattis, James. "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America." *The Office of the Secretary of Defense*, January, 2018, 5.

U.S. forces, but rather uses the term “retrograde.” Army Doctrine Publication 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, uses “retreat” only once when describing something adversaries might potentially do in the face of a U.S. offensive. Without parsing words, a complete withdrawal of one of only two major ground combat units permanently stationed in Europe, in U.S. doctrinal terms, is a retrograde operation. In laymen’s terms, that’s a retreat.²¹ Calling it anything else will not change Vladimir Putin’s perception of it as such either.

When President Trump announced his decision to remove U.S. troops from Germany, it was immediately called into question by 22 Republican members of Congress,²² and European-NATO allies said the move is “detrimental to U.S. interests and to the interests of NATO as a whole.”²³ In 2016, a RAND report found that in the manner in which NATO forces were arrayed across the theater, the allies should not expect to succeed in defending the Baltic states against a Russian invasion. Moreover, the alliance would require at least seven additional armored brigades to complete that task.²⁴ Nobody should expect that the United States would supply all seven of those brigades, nor is 2CR even an armored brigade, but the point remains that an effective deterrence by denial strategy requires more forces immediately available in the theater, not less.

Furthermore, the 2018 NDS recognizes that “Russia seeks... to shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change European... security and economic structures

²¹ United States Army Combined Arms Center. *ADP 3-90, Offense and Defense*. Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2019, 4-3.

²² Burns.

²³ Gordon and Youssef.

²⁴ Shlapak, David A. and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016, 1. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html.

to its favor."²⁵ If not sufficiently deterred by denial, Russia could easily accomplish this goal by performing a small land grab in a NATO country, forcing a NATO Article 5 crisis. If NATO members could not reach a consensus to react, then the glue that binds NATO together could easily fall apart.

Prognostication is a risky business, but a Russian-forced NATO Article 5 crisis seems to be becoming more likely than not in the near future. In August 2020, Montenegro's pro-Western party lost its position of power in parliamentary elections to a pro-Russian/pro-Serbian alliance, giving Putin another friendly face inside NATO's borders.²⁶ It is easy to imagine how in these kinds of circumstances the Kremlin might offer to provide Montenegro's new pro-Russian party with security assistance to assure a peaceful transfer of power from the pro-Western bloc when the time comes. Such an offer could quickly balloon into the protection of Russian nationals in Montenegro, as the world has seen Russia do more than once before. Montenegro is an even more likely target for Putin owing both to its strategic access to the Adriatic and President Trump's 2018 comments questioning whether or not the U.S. would consent to an Article 5 defense of the country.²⁷ Correlation may not be causation, but it is worth noting that the Russian invasion of Ukraine occurred only nine months after the U.S. withdrew the last of its heavy BCTs and the V-Corps headquarters from Europe in June 2013. Another exit of U.S. troops from theater may be all the reassurance Vladimir Putin requires to strike out on another *fait accompli* endeavor.

²⁵ Mattis, 2.

²⁶ Stradner, Ivana and Milan Jovanović. "Montenegro is the Latest Domino to Fall Toward Russia." *Foreign Policy*, Sep 17, 2020.

²⁷ Wagner, John. "Trump Says Defending Tiny NATO Ally Montenegro could Lead to World War III." *The Washington Post*, Jul 18, 2018.

Counterpunching: A strategic endeavor?

One counterargument offered by Secretary Esper is that these moves are apart of a larger strategy that gives the U.S. greater strategic flexibility to respond to worldwide threats. However, when the U.S. President openly admits that moving 12,000 troops out of Germany is a form of punishment to an ally, that communicates the lack of strategic thought which informed the decision. The Secretary's post hoc justification that removing 2CR from Europe frees up a new brigade-sized element for worldwide deployment is, therefore, a strawman argument, and especially so when the plan was to immediately deploy the same unit back to Europe as a rotational force. Rotational forces have actually proven to provide the country less flexibility than forward stationing. Consider that the Active Duty U.S. Army has only nine ABCTs and three rotational ABCT commitments, Europe, Korea, and Kuwait. At any given time, one is required in the country, another in train-up, and a third in reset. As others have argued, this model isn't truly sustainable or flexible,²⁸ and yet the plan is to now 2CR to the same, expensive, rotational model.

The intention behind this proposed move, an attempt to motivate Germany to spend in accordance with its NATO commitments, is a valid concern. The means of persuasion, however, only further strain the transatlantic relationship. This proposal weakens the United States' most important alliance, NATO, and has several potential unforeseen consequences, both militarily and economically, should Russia choose to exploit the seam.

Recommendations

²⁸ Van Wie, Ryan. "Bring the Tanks Back: It is Time to Put a U.S. Armored Brigade in Germany." War On The Rocks. Accessed 22 September, 2020.

For all the reasons outlined above, USEUCOM should argue not only to keep 2CR in the theater but further make the case that the land component command's real requirement is for the permanent return of a heavy ABCT to the European Theater. This would have been a non-starter under the previous administration, however in the current political environment there may be room for negotiation on this point. Regardless, the military should not be concerned with politics when offering the best military advice to the Commander in Chief. While the ideal course of action to support a deterrence by denial posture toward Russia would be to maintain 2CR and add an ABCT to the theater, it could suffice to simply convert 2CR back into an Armored unit. One ABCT's worth of equipment costs approximately \$2.8 billion,²⁹ or roughly one-half the low-end estimated initial cost of restationing the 12,000 troops. Recommitting an ABCT to Europe arguably does give the U.S. a more strategically flexible posture in that it potentially eliminates one of the current rotational requirements.³⁰ If 2CR were converted to an ABCT, the Active U.S. Army would then have ten in the inventory, and only two rotations to split between the nine remaining formations. This would reduce the overall stress on the force by decreasing the OPTEMPO, which also supports the Senior Army Leadership's priorities published on October 13, 2020.³¹ This recommendation then benefits EUCOM's deterrent posture, enhances an overall U.S. globally responsive force posture, and improves the individual lives of many U.S. soldiers and their families.

²⁹ Deni, 10.

³⁰ Van Wie.

³¹ U.S. Army, *Action Plan to Prioritize People and Teams*. Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, October 13, 2020.

A former USAREUR CG has argued that rotational forces have exercised long dormant logistic processes for moving units in and out of theater.³² This is valid, but this fact alone is an insufficient reason to continue, and add to, an inefficient rotational forces model. These logistic functions can and do get worked regularly through the already occurring, and future planned, large-scale theater exercises like DEFENDER EUROPE 2020.

Conclusion

At present, the force posture realignment price tag sits at \$6-8 billion, plus the additional cost of rotating a second brigade-sized formation through the theater every nine months, and not one NATO-member ally asked the U.S. to partially exit the theater. For that price, the United States loses credible combat response capability and hard-earned institutional knowledge gained through sustained partner-country engagement while further emboldening the Russians to strike at NATO's unity and efficacy. Therefore, removing 12,000 troops from Germany is a textbook unforced error. It's more expensive than the alternatives, it makes mission success more difficult for commanders at multiple levels, and it plays right into the hands of an adversary who has shown a penchant for exploiting strategic fault lines. While President Trump appeared to view this retrograde operation as a good thing, this line of thinking appears to have been clouded by a short-term focus on "fairness" in NATO-member defense expenditures at the expense of the long-term benefit of preserving strategic access to European markets. Deterrence only appears to be expensive when it is successful and

³² Hodges, Ben. "Don't Put US Bases in Poland." Politico. Accessed Sep 21, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/dont-put-us-bases-in-poland/>.

there are no open wars with which to compare the costs.³³ The United States' best bet for continued deterrence of Russian ambitions remains a strong force posture on the ground in Europe. Removing 2CR from the theater sends all the wrong messages to both our allies and adversaries. A permanently stationed armored formation, however, would send a strong and clear message that the United States remains committed to preventing disastrous conflicts from returning to Europe.

³³ Watling, Jack. *By Parity and Presence: Deterring Russia with Conventional Land Forces*. London, UK: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2020. 2.