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Shrinking America's Global Reach: U.S. Military Bases in Europe Remain Vital

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As part of a policy that is leading to strategic shrinkage in the world, the Obama Administration's recent defense cuts heavily impact the U.S. military footprint in Europe. These cuts will send the wrong signal on America's commitment to transatlantic security and will embolden U.S. adversaries in the Euro-Atlantic region. Most importantly, the move will reduce the ability and flexibility of the U.S. to react to the unexpected in Eurasia and the Middle East.

A Shrinking Force Posture in Europe. On January 26, the Pentagon announced that the U.S. military force posture in Europe will be reduced as part of the latest round of defense cuts. These cuts include:

- The inactivation of one Air Force A-10 squadron from Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany, in 2013.

- The inactivation of the 603rd Air Control Squadron at Aviano Air Base, Italy, in 2013.
- Following the V Corps headquarters deployment to Afghanistan later this year, the Army will reduce the V Corps headquarters structure, and it will not return to Europe.
- The inactivation of the 170th Brigade Combat Team (BCT) and the 172nd BCT in 2013 and 2014, respectively. This amounts to more than 8,000 soldiers.
- In addition to the two BCTs, the U.S. Army in Europe will see a reduction of approximately 2,500 soldiers from enabling units over the next five years.

U.S. Forces in Europe Today.

Today, there are approximately 80,000 U.S. service personnel from all branches of the military based in Europe. They are spread across 28 main operating bases primarily in Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Spain. Crucially, these forces include four BCTs. These BCTs form the backbone of U.S. ground capability in Europe.

There are some who believe that basing U.S. troops in Europe is a Cold War anachronism. However, the forward basing of U.S. troops in Europe today is just as important as it was during the Cold War, albeit for different reasons.

The U.S. military presence in Europe helps to achieve American policy aims in the broader Eurasia and Middle East regions. From the Arctic to the Levant, from the Maghreb to the Caucasus, Europe is at one of the most important crossroads of the world. U.S. military bases in Europe provide American leaders with flexibility, resilience, and options in a dangerous world. Today, the garrisons of American service personnel in Europe are no longer the fortresses of the Cold War but the forward operating bases of the 21st century.

America's Interests in Europe.

It is in America's financial interest to see a safe and secure Europe. Regional security means economic viability. The economies of the 27 member states of the European Union, along with United States, account for approximately half of the global economy. The U.S. and the EU are each other's number one trading partners.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3516>

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It is also in America's interest to see a relevant and strong NATO. U.S. forces play a major role in the capacity building of key European allies. This has huge benefits for the United States. In 2010, the U.S. carried out 33 major multinational training exercises involving 50,000 troops from 40 countries in Europe. U.S. forces also help European allies prepare for missions like the one in Afghanistan. For example, today there is a Georgian infantry battalion fighting alongside U.S. Marines in Helmand province, one of the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan. The more America trains its allies to carry out challenging missions such as those in Afghanistan, the better the burden is shared with its partners.

Policy Driven by Cost, Not Strategy. The decision to reduce the size of the U.S. military footprint in Europe appears to have been based not on an empirical or strategic review of U.S. force requirements in Europe but on perceived financial savings. The Obama Administration first announced on April 8, 2011, that it was reversing a 2004 decision to remove two of the four BCTs from Europe and would now bring only one BCT back to the United States. The reason for this change, according to the Department of Defense, was:

Based on the administration's review, consultations with allies and the findings of NATO's new Strategic Concept, the department will retain three BCTs in Europe to maintain a flexible and rapidly deployable ground force to fulfill the United States' commitments to NATO, to engage

effectively with allies and partners, and to meet the broad range of 21st century challenges.¹

However, it is clear that the announcement on January 2012, only nine months later, stated that two BCTs will return from Europe after all. Without an explanation of what has changed in the geo-strategic picture of Europe or the advice from U.S. allies since last April, this decision was driven by defense cuts and not strategy.

Perceived Financial Savings Is a Red Herring. The main reason given by proponents of reducing U.S. bases in Europe is saving money. This is clearly the rationale for the Obama Administration's recent decision. This is dangerous, shortsighted, and based on the false assumption that the U.S. can project the same degree of power with rotational forces in the way it currently does with permanently based troops in Europe. Under current plans, more than 10,000 soldiers will be leaving Europe. This will be replaced by only one battalion rotating through Europe for training at any given time. Furthermore, most estimates on savings do not include the cost of building new infrastructure in the U.S. for returning units, the cost of rotating units between the U.S. and Europe, or the strain this would have on the smaller army that the Obama Administration is proposing.

Time for U.S. leadership in Europe. The White House should:

- **Put America's national security interests ahead of defense cuts.** Important decisions such as the number of bases and the

disposition of troop numbers in Europe need to be made as part of a strategic review of U.S. interests in Europe and not from a desire to slash the defense budget to find savings.

- **Show U.S. commitment to NATO and Euro-Atlantic security.** The U.S. troop presence in Europe is the most visible sign of U.S. support to NATO. At a time when NATO is transforming for the 21st century, it needs American leadership and commitment.
- **Be honest and open with European allies.** The Obama Administration needs to make decisions on U.S. troop reductions in Europe only after consulting with key European allies and with the broader NATO alliance.
- **Reward key U.S. allies with closer defense cooperation.** Instead of reducing the numbers of U.S. military bases in Europe, the U.S. should be looking at the potential for establishing new bases—especially on the periphery of Europe and with allies who have been committed to Euro-Atlantic security, like Georgia.

The U.S. military presence in Europe deters American adversaries, strengthens allies, and protects U.S. interests. Whether it is preparing and deploying U.S. and allied troops for Afghanistan or responding to a humanitarian crisis in the region, the U.S. is able to project power and react to the unexpected because of its forward-based military

1. Press release, "DOD Announced U.S. Force Posture Revision in Europe," Department of Defense, April 8, 2011, at <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=14397> (February 23, 2012).

capabilities in Europe. Reducing this capability will only make America weaker on the world stage.

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