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Removing Brigade Combat Teams from Europe Undermines U.S. Interests

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Recently, the House of Representatives passed an amendment that calls for the removal of all four U.S. Army Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) currently based in Europe. The sponsors of the amendment, Representatives Mike Coffman (R-CO) and Jared Polis (D-CO), argue that the U.S. should not be subsidizing the defense of its European partners at a time when many European nations are cutting their own defense budgets.

However, basing American troops in Europe is first and foremost in the U.S. national security interest. It is true that the presence of U.S. forces in Europe contributes to the collective defense of European allies, but this is a consequence of, not the reason for, maintaining a robust military presence. The alternative—replacing permanent U.S. forces with rotational troops—would actually

be more costly and would reduce American capabilities and influence in the region.

Further Than Obama.

On January 26, the Obama Administration reversed its previous position of removing only one BCT from Europe and announced further reductions of U.S. military forces in Europe as part of the latest round of defense cuts. The U.S. Army's share of these cuts includes:

- Inactivation of the 170th BCT in 2013 and the 172nd BCT in 2014—a reduction of more than 8,000 soldiers, and
- An additional reduction of approximately 2,500 soldiers in enabling units of the U.S. Army in Europe over the next five years.

The Coffman–Polis amendment, which was passed by a vote of 226–196, goes further than the Obama Administration's current proposal and calls for the return to the United States of all four BCTs currently stationed in Europe and their replacement by rotational forces.

European Defense Spending Is Dangerously Low. Coffman and Polis both recognize the importance of Europe and of maintaining the

U.S. commitment to NATO. They also rightly point out that European defense spending is dangerously low. The support inside the House of Representatives for the Coffman–Polis amendment is illustrative of the frustration among many in Congress about the lack of defense spending in Europe.

This is a fair point. In 2011, just three of the 28 NATO members—the United States, Britain, and Greece—spent the required 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. As expected, France fell below the 2 percent mark in 2011. To put this into perspective, New York City spends more on policing (\$4.46 billion in fiscal year 2011) than 13 NATO members each spend on their own defense. The Coffman–Polis amendment should be a wake-up call to America's European allies.

U.S. National Interest—Not Europe's Defense. The commonly held belief that U.S. forces are in Europe to protect European allies from a threat that no longer exists is wrong. In fact, forward-basing U.S. troops in Europe is just as important now as it was during the Cold War, albeit for different reasons.

One of the most obvious benefits of having U.S. troops in Europe is its geographical proximity to some of

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the most dangerous and contested regions of the world. For example, when ordered to intervene in Libya, U.S. commanders in Europe were able to act effectively and promptly because of the well-established and mature U.S. military footprint in southern Europe.

U.S. European Command has physical borders with Russia, the Arctic, Iran, Asia Minor, the Caspian Sea, and North Africa. Most of these areas have long histories of instability and a potential for future instability that could directly impact the security interests and economic well-being of the U.S. Some of the most important energy security and trade corridors—such as the transit routes in the Caucasus, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Gibraltar—are on the periphery of Europe and are located in some of the world’s most dangerous and unstable regions. As Arctic sea lanes start to open, shipping is increasing in that region and is creating new security challenges.

Rotational Forces: Less Capable, More Costly. Proponents of reducing U.S. military bases in Europe use cost savings as their main rationale. However, they do not consider the costs associated with building new infrastructure in the U.S. for returning units, the costs of rotating units between the U.S. and Europe, and the strain this would impose on the smaller Army that the Obama Administration is proposing.

The U.S. simply cannot project the same degree of power with rotational forces that it does with troops permanently based in Europe. Permanently basing troops creates an enduring relationship with

European partners. This helps with training and building the capabilities of European partners. Furthermore, permanently based troops are formed from active-duty units, which tend to have a higher level of deployment readiness than their Reserve or National Guard counterparts.

Finally, the morale and welfare of the troops and their families need to be considered in such decisions. After experiencing such a high operational tempo for the past 10 years, military families do not need another strain resulting from loved ones “deploying” to Europe for unaccompanied tours. In this regard, the current structure of accompanied tours in Europe, however costly, contributes to family stability and troop welfare during a period of high operational tempo.

The Next Steps. Congress should:

- **Put America’s national security interests ahead of defense cuts.** Important decisions, such as those concerning the numbers of bases and troops in Europe, need to be made as part of a strategic review of U.S. interests in Europe, 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 for NATO. At a time when NATO is transforming for the 21st century, it needs American leadership and commitment.

■ **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, such as Georgia.

Maintain U.S. Strength on the World Stage. The challenge for U.S. decision makers is to keep a military force that can promote U.S. interests in the region without creating a culture of dependence on the U.S. security umbrella among America’s European allies. But the Coffman–Polis amendment, while well-intended, takes the wrong approach.

The U.S. military presence in Europe deters American adversaries, strengthens allies, and protects U.S. interests. Whether preparing U.S. and allied troops for deployment to Afghanistan or responding to a humanitarian crisis in the region, the U.S. can project power and react to the unexpected more quickly and effectively by using its forward-based military capabilities in Europe. Reducing this capability would only make America weaker on the world stage.

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