

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Removing Brigade Combat Teams from Europe Undercuts NATO Allies

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In January 2012, the Obama Administration reversed an earlier decision to remove one Brigade Combat Team (BCT) permanently based in Europe sometime after 2015 and announced new plans to remove two BCTs by 2014. The current plan is to replace the two BCTs with a single U.S.-based rotational battalion. The re-election of President Obama makes these troop reductions from Europe all but certain.

Making matters worse, even though this announcement was made more than 10 months ago, many of America's allies are still unclear as to what the reduction in U.S. troops in Europe will mean for them. The Administration needs to do a better job of explaining to European allies how the plans for a smaller rotational force will affect transatlantic security, interoperability, and future training exercises.

**The Value of U.S. Forces in Europe.** The U.S. military presence in Europe deters 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, forward-based military capabilities in Europe allow the U.S. to project power and react to the unexpected more quickly and effectively. Reducing this capability would only make America and NATO weaker on the world stage.

Currently, the U.S. Army has two heavy BCTs (the 170th and 172nd Brigade Combat Teams in Germany), one infantry BCT (the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Italy), and one Stryker BCT (the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Germany) permanently based in Europe. The Bush Administration decided in 2004 to remove two of the four BCTs from Europe, but the Obama Administration announced in April 2011 that it was reversing this decision and would now bring only one BCT back to the United States. The reason, 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.<sup>1</sup>

However, the Administration announced on January 26, 2012, that the 170th BCT is slated to be cut in 2013 and the 172nd BCT in 2014. In addition, the U.S. Army in Europe will see a further reduction of approximately 2,500 soldiers from enabling units over the next five years. In all, more than 10,000 soldiers will return from Europe.

**Diminishing U.S. Force Posture Threatens U.S. Interests.** The Obama Administration's defense cuts in the U.S. military footprint in Europe send the wrong signal about America's commitment to transatlantic security and will embolden U.S. adversaries in the Euro-Atlantic region. Most important, the move will reduce the ability and flexibility of the U.S. to react to the unexpected in Eurasia and the Middle East.

Many American allies not only value the permanent presence of U.S.

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troops in Europe; they depend on it—whether it is for training, readiness, or deterrence against perceived adversaries.

The U.S. troop presence in Europe is the most visible sign of U.S. support for NATO. Many of America's allies depend on the sort of training and defense cooperation that has resulted from the decades-old presence of U.S. forces in Europe. In places such as Afghanistan, or even previously in Iraq, the U.S. relied on its European allies having the capabilities and interoperability required to fight alongside American forces. In part, this was made possible by the shared ethos, joint training, and the interoperability that resulted from the permanent U.S. force presence in Europe.

A capable and militarily strong NATO is in America's interest. NATO is only as strong as its member states, which is why joint training between U.S. and allied forces is vital. Preparing the militaries of European allies to deploy outside NATO's borders offers 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. Many of these training exercises were intended to prepare European allies for deployments to Afghanistan. Approximately 80 percent of the countries with forces deployed in Afghanistan are European. If not for these European troops in Afghanistan, the U.S. would have to deploy more troops.

Today, as a result of the Administration's policies, many long-standing allies in Europe are questioning America's commitment

to transatlantic security. The Administration's policies in Europe are being watched by other U.S. allies around the world who are also wondering whether the same could happen in their regions.

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.

**Time to Be Up Front with Allies.** Since the announcement that two BCTs were being permanently removed from Europe, little detail has been provided to American allies on how a rotational force will fill the gap. This is leading long-standing American allies to question U.S. resolve with respect to NATO and the security of Europe.

Military decisions made in Washington will affect America's allies in NATO and across Europe. Many inside NATO look to Washington for leadership and resolve. It is only right that America's NATO allies are informed of any decisions that will affect their own security. The Administration should therefore:

- **Be honest and open with European allies.** The U.S. should consult with key European allies and the NATO alliance before

making any decisions on U.S. troop numbers in Europe.

- **Demonstrate 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. As NATO is transforming itself for the 21st century, it will need American leadership and commitment.

- **Put America's national security interests ahead of defense cuts.** A strategic review of U.S. interests in Europe, not a desire to slash the defense budget, should guide important decisions such as the number of bases and the distribution of troops in Europe.

**Do Not Disengage from Europe.** The Administration's cuts in the U.S. force posture in Europe are part of a large array of defense cuts that will weaken America and its allies. The decision to remove a large number of U.S. troops and their associated military capabilities from Europe sends the signal to European allies that America no longer cares about Europe. The future of NATO remains uncertain, and many in Europe are questioning America's resolve. Now is not the time for U.S. disengagement from transatlantic security.

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1. News release, "DOD Announces U.S. Force Posture Revision in Europe," U.S. Department of Defense, April 8, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=14397> (accessed October 19, 2012).