

# LECTURE

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## The Future of U.S. Bases in Europe: A View from America

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### Abstract

*Reductions in the U.S. military capability in Europe are often carried out without considering either their possible effect or how they will be viewed by both friends and foes. Reductions in U.S. troop numbers in Europe send the wrong signal about America's commitment to transatlantic security and will embolden U.S. adversaries. Most important, they will reduce the ability and flexibility of the U.S. to react to the unexpected in the region. Therefore, the Obama Administration should freeze all plans to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Europe until a proper review has been carried out and America's allies have been properly consulted and should examine ways to increase the U.S. presence, especially on Europe's periphery and with allies who have been committed to Euro-Atlantic security.*

I would first like to thank James Corum and his team here at the Baltic Defense College for putting together this interesting panel and for inviting me to speak here today. It is an honor to be able to address such an esteemed audience on an issue that is of such importance: the future of U.S. forces in Europe.

This is an issue that often gets overlooked in the larger debate about transatlantic relations. Perhaps it is because the U.S. has been in Europe for so long now that we are taken for granted. So we assume that they will always be here.

Yet there is a movement inside Washington to reduce the numbers of—and in some cases completely remove—U.S. forces in Europe. These calls are coming at a time when America's commitment to

### KEY POINTS

- Instead of reducing the U.S. military presence in Europe, the Obama Administration should examine ways to increase the U.S. presence, especially on Europe's periphery and with allies who have been committed to Euro-Atlantic security.
- The primary objective of U.S. forces in Europe is to provide a forward-based military capability that gives U.S. decision makers timely and flexible military options in defending America and promoting American interests in the region. The U.S. contribution to the collective defense of Europe is simply a positive side effect.
- Whether preparing U.S. and allied troops and deploying them 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 will only make America and her allies weaker on the world stage.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1233>

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transatlantic relations is being called into question. It is coming at a time when the future security and stability of the region is uncertain. It comes at a time when potential adversaries are getting stronger and bolder.

In my opinion, reductions in U.S. troop numbers in Europe send the wrong signal about America's commitment to transatlantic security and will embolden U.S. adversaries. Most important, the move will reduce the ability and flexibility of the U.S. to react to the unexpected in the region.

This is why I am grateful for this opportunity today to speak on this issue.

### **History and Future of U.S. Forces in Europe**

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. military presence in Europe has been viewed as low-hanging fruit for those looking for savings in the defense budget. Reductions in the U.S. military capability in Europe are often carried out without considering the effect such moves may have—or without considering how such moves will be viewed by friends and foes alike.

At its peak in 1953, the U.S. had approximately 450,000 troops in Europe operating across 1,200 sites. Due to the Soviet threat to Western Europe, the U.S. had good reason to base a high number of troops in Europe.

During the early 1990s, as part of the so-called peace dividend after the Cold War, U.S. troop numbers in Europe were slashed. For example, between just 1990 and 1993, the number of U.S. soldiers in Europe decreased from 213,000 to 122,000. After all, it was the end of the Cold War—why would they be needed? Yet their use actually increased. During the same period, from 1990 and 1993, the U.S. Army in Europe supported 42 deployments that required 95,579 personnel.

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### **Make no mistake: The Obama Administration's most recent defense cuts will deeply impact the U.S. military footprint in Europe.**

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Today, only 64,000 U.S. troops remain permanently based in Europe, and the number of sites has been reduced by 85 percent from the Cold War high. So what is the future of these forces? Depending on

where you are, or what your security concerns and force drivers are, it is not looking good.

Make no mistake: The Obama Administration's most recent defense cuts will deeply impact the U.S. military footprint in Europe. On January 2012, the Pentagon announced reductions in the U.S. military force posture in Europe:

- Inactivation of one A-10 squadron from Germany in 2013.
- Inactivation of an Air Control Squadron from Italy in 2013.
- Inactivation of the 170th Brigade Combat Team (BCT) in 2013 and the 172nd BCT in 2014. This will completely eliminate the U.S. Army's heavy armor capability in Europe.
- An additional reduction of approximately 2,500 soldiers in enabling units of the U.S. Army in Europe over the next five years.

These cuts have been supported by some Members of Congress and media commentators who believe that basing U.S. troops in Europe is a Cold War relic. It is worth examining these cuts more closely.

First, the Air Force cuts. The U.S. Air Force has already reduced its number of aircraft and personnel in Europe by 75 percent since 1990. The removal of the 81st Fighter Squadron and the Air Control Squadron will create significant gaps in U.S. aviation capability in Europe.

Disbanding the 81st Fighter Squadron, which is expected to deactivate and leave Europe after 53 years later this month, also means retiring its 20 A-10 ground attack aircraft.

The important history of the 81st Fighter Squadron should not be overlooked. It played a key role in U.S.-led operations in the region and beyond, including the first Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo, the no-fly zone in Iraq in the late 1990s, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and most recently over Libya as part of Operation Unified Protector.

The Defense Department has offered little public explanation of the logic of removing this capability from Europe. When challenged on this point during his 2012 testimony to the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, then-EUCOM Commander Admiral James Stavridis justified the decision by

saying said that “even though we’re taking out some aircraft, we’re going to bring some new aircraft ... including the V-22 which is optimized for special operations.”

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Nobody disputes the combat effectiveness of the V-22, which has proved itself in Iraq and Afghanistan. The V-22 is a very welcome addition and will provide U.S. commanders in Europe an additional capability, especially U.S. Special Forces in Europe.

However, the V-22 is not a substitute for the A-10. I do not need to tell an audience like this that the A-10 is a ground attack aircraft. The V-22 Osprey is a vertical takeoff and landing tiltrotor aircraft designed to transport troops. The capabilities offered by the A-10 and the V-22 could not be more opposite.

Then, in my opinion, we have the more worrying cuts to the ground forces.

At the time of the Obama Administration’s announcement in January 2012, the U.S. Army in Europe had two heavy BCTs (the 170th and 172nd Brigade Combat Teams in Germany); one airborne Infantry BCT (the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Italy); and one Stryker BCT (the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Germany) permanently based in Europe. Because they constitute U.S. Army in Europe’s primary armored force, cutting the two heavy BCTs will leave a significant capability gap in the U.S. ground forces.

This actually echoes the analysis of the 2005 Overseas Basing Commission, which warned against removing a heavy BCT from Europe.<sup>1</sup> Despite this warning, the Obama Administration is removing both heavy BCTs.

The deactivation of the 170th BCT took place in October 2012—slightly earlier than the planned date of 2013—marking the end of 50 years of having U.S.

combat soldiers in Baumholder, Germany. The deactivation of the 172nd BCT is expected to take place in October of this year. Once these units leave Europe they will never come back.

In fact, the last 22 remaining U.S. main battle tanks left Germany in March. There is not a single U.S. tank on European soil for the first time in 69 years. General Patton must be rolling in his grave!

In all, this will mean that more than 10,000 soldiers will be removed from Europe.

The Department of Defense justifies this move by stating that the loss of these two BCTs will be mitigated by a dedicated BCT based in the U.S. that will rotate its battalions to Europe for joint training—one battalion at a time. However, we all know that a single infantry battalion rotating through Europe cannot provide the same capability as two permanently based heavy BCTs.

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We are also told that the current BCT structure is “static and essentially parked in Germany” and that dedicating a BCT in the United States to focus on Europe would allow its battalions to rotate to places like the Balkans, the Baltics, or other places in Eastern Europe.

Don’t get me wrong: A renewed U.S. focus on these regions in Europe is welcome, but a single BCT based permanently in the United States cannot properly meet this ambition by occasionally rotating one of its battalions to Europe for joint training. Furthermore, elements of the BCTs based in Germany and Italy already deploy to Eastern Europe when they are not deployed on combat operations overseas.

When it comes to the future role of U.S. rotational forces, one only has to look at the upcoming NATO exercise Steadfast Jazz to get an indication as to how seriously the U.S. is taking transatlantic

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1. Judy Dempsey, “Questioning EU’s Will, U.S. Panel Backs NATO,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/12/world/europe/12iht-nato.html> (accessed May 22, 2013).

security. Steadfast Jazz 2013 is important for three reasons.

First, this training exercise will be the largest NATO training exercise since the end of the Cold War, and it is taking place in a region of Europe where there is a concern of external aggression.

Second, this training exercise is taking place at a critical time for NATO. The NATO-led combat mission in Afghanistan will be coming to an end in 2014. Consequently, the main driver of defense cooperation in Europe will slowly evaporate as the mission in Afghanistan winds down. As NATO redefines its mission in a post-Afghan War world, training events such as Steadfast Jazz help to focus the alliance on its collective defense.

And third, this is the first major NATO exercise since the Obama Administration announced the so-called Asia pivot and signaled that it would be significantly reducing U.S. troop presence in Europe. Therefore, friend and foe alike will be watching the training event closely to see to what degree the U.S. participates. Although the Department of Defense has not stated how many U.S. troops will participate in Steadfast Jazz 2013, some sources are reporting that only one company of U.S. troops (fewer than 200 soldiers) will be made available.

To make these cuts worse, the decision to reduce the number of BCTs in Europe appears to have been based on perceived financial savings, not an empirical or strategic review of U.S. force requirements. One only has to look at the Administration's timeline of announcements to see this.

In April 2011, the Obama Administration initially announced that it was reversing the 2004 decision to remove two of the four BCTs from Europe and would instead only bring one BCT back to the United States. The Department of Defense provided the following justification:

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>2</sup>

In fact, former Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that no U.S. troops would be brought back from Europe until after 2015, when NATO leaders had agreed to complete the handover of security responsibilities to the Afghans and end combat operations.

A mere nine months later, in January 2012, the Obama Administration changed the policy, announcing that two BCTs will return back to the U.S. from Europe no later than 2014.

The Administration has not explained what changed in the geostrategic picture of Europe since April 2011, so it can only be assumed that perceived cost savings, not strategic rationale, drove this decision.

### **Two Views from America**

So how is this issue viewed in America? There has been stiff opposition from various corners in the U.S. to the continued presence of U.S. forces in Europe.

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### **While most of the opposition against U.S. forces in Europe is based on misconceptions, there are legitimate concerns on the U.S. side of the Atlantic about the ever-decreasing levels of defense spending in Europe.**

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For opponents of U.S. forces in Europe, their argument stems from the false assumption that the troops are there to protect Europeans. By extension, it is therefore believed that the U.S. taxpayer is subsidizing the defense of wealthy Europeans who have decided to cut their own defense expenditure for the benefit of a bloated welfare state. I am afraid that advocates of U.S. ground troops in Europe, like myself, The Heritage Foundation, and most of us in the room, have an up-hill battle ahead of us.

While most of the opposition against U.S. forces in Europe is based on misconceptions, there are legitimate concerns on the U.S. side of the Atlantic

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2. 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 May 23, 2013).

about the ever-decreasing levels of defense spending in Europe. This frustration has manifested itself in the debate about U.S. forces in Europe.

As an intergovernmental security alliance, NATO is only as strong as its member states. Of NATO's 28 members, 26 are European. European countries collectively have more than two million men and women in uniform, yet by some estimates, only 100,000—a mere 5 percent—of them have the capability to deploy outside national borders.

In 2012, just four of the 28 NATO members—the United States, Estonia, Britain, and Greece—spent the required 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. France fell below the 2 percent mark in 2011. The lack of defense investment by Europeans since the end of the Cold War and the subsequent dependence on the U.S. have planted the seed of discontent among U.S. lawmakers.

### **The Case for U.S. Troops in Europe Today**

In my opinion, however, basing American troops in Europe directly serves U.S. national security interests.

Of course, the presence of U.S. forces in Europe contributes to the collective defense of U.S. allies on the continent, but this is a consequence of, not the reason for, maintaining a robust presence. 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 some of America's European allies.

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.

U.S. bases in Europe provide American leaders with flexibility, resilience, and options in a dangerous multipolar world. The huge 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. This is why force reductions in Europe are a concern.

There are strong economic, political, and geographical reasons to keep a large, robust, and capable U.S. military force in Europe. The geography of the U.S. European Command shows why the region matters. Just look at EUCOM's area of responsibility: It has physical borders with Russia, the Arctic,

Iran, Asia Minor, Syria, the Caspian Sea, and North Africa and the Middle East. 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 United States and its allies.

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To the south of Europe, from the eastern Atlantic Ocean to the Middle East and up to the Caucasus is an arc of instability. This region is experiencing increasing instability from demographic pressures, increased commodity prices, interstate and intrastate conflict, tribal politics, competition over water and other natural resources, religious tension, revolutionary tendencies, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and frozen conflicts. This region also has some of the world's most vital shipping lanes, energy resources, and trade choke points.

This is a recipe for instability.

Recent events in North Africa after the popular uprisings in 2011 have shown the utility of basing robust U.S. military capabilities near potential global hot spots. 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.

Inside Europe itself, the Balkans have a potential for future instability. Although security has improved dramatically in this region, there is still a potential for more violence. I have just come from a security conference in Montenegro, and if I learned anything, it was that the security situation in the Balkans is far from settled and that what America does and says in Europe and the Balkans is watched very closely.

To the north, the Arctic or the High North is becoming more contested than ever before. During summer months, Arctic ice has been decreasing in size, and new shipping lanes to Asia are opening as a

result. Luckily, the Arctic is a region of low tension—and everything must be done to keep it that way. But many capabilities required for civilian purposes in the harsh Arctic environment—such as search and rescue and situational awareness—can only be provided by the military.

Russia is also important to the U.S. troop presence in Europe. With the Cold War over, Russia no longer poses a direct military threat to Europe, but Russia's future is uncertain. For some NATO members, Russia is still a force driver in military planning. For other U.S. allies, such as Georgia, Russia continues to be an aggressor.

Nothing indicates that Russia is on a path to reform. Its economy is in tatters, and its demographics and aging population are putting pressures on the state. In Russia, democratic freedoms are in retreat, corruption is endemic, and the future is bleak. The same failings of the Soviet Union a quarter of a century ago are starting to reappear in Putin's Russia today.

Although Russia by itself should not drive the U.S. military presence in Europe, the second-order effects of Russian-induced instability, whether intentional or not, in the region should be an ongoing NATO concern. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall caught many by surprise. Western leaders should not allow a resurgent Russia to catch them by surprise, too.

Then you have the economic arguments for U.S. forces in Europe. A stable, secure, and economically viable Europe is in America's financial interest. Regional security means economic viability and prosperity.

For more than 60 years, the U.S. military presence in Europe has contributed to European stability, which has economically benefited both Europeans and Americans. The economies of the 27 member states of the European Union, along with the United States, account for approximately half of the global economy. The U.S. and the members of the EU are each other's number one trading partners.

Then there is the political case for U.S. troops in Europe. This is because I believe that relations with European allies are best done through NATO. The U.S. troop presence in Europe is the strongest signal of American support for NATO. Regardless of

its institutional shortcomings, NATO has anchored the U.S. inside Europe for the past 64 years. It is important for the U.S. to engage its European allies through NATO, especially with the EU looking fractured and weak.

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### **Considering the EU's bleak future, the U.S. needs to continue multilateral political engagement in Europe through NATO. Maintaining full participation in NATO allows the U.S. to maintain a leadership role in European affairs in a way the EU would prevent.**

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Since the EU's failed 2004 Constitutional Treaty and the subsequent political drama surrounding the Lisbon Treaty that soon followed, the political situation among EU member states has become more fragile and incoherent. Recognizing this in 2005, the U.S. Overseas Basing Commission stated that the French and Dutch referendums rejecting the EU Constitutional Treaty "highlighted the continued weakness of the [European] Union and thus the importance of NATO to our relationship with Europe."<sup>3</sup> Lingering political fallout from the Constitutional and Lisbon Treaties, coupled with the current eurozone crisis, has increased the risk of political instability in Europe.

Considering the EU's bleak future, the U.S. needs to continue multilateral political engagement in Europe through NATO. Maintaining full participation in NATO allows the U.S. to maintain a leadership role in European affairs in a way the EU would prevent. With all of the problems and the uncertain future, NATO should continue to be the primary interlocutor for U.S. engagement in Europe.

Then there is the capacity-building argument. 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. forces and our allies is vital to keeping NATO a strong alliance.

Preparing the militaries of European allies to deploy outside of NATO's borders offers huge

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3. Dempsey, "Questioning EU's Will, U.S. Panel Backs NATO."

benefits for the United States. In 2010, the date for which I found the most recent information, 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 to prepare European allies for deployments to Afghanistan.

Approximately 80 percent of the countries with forces deployed in Afghanistan are European. This is simple: If these European troops were not in Afghanistan, the U.S. would need to have deployed more troops.

Sadly, Admiral Stavridis recently told Congress that he is cancelling about 140 security assistance programs with European allies due to defense cuts resulting from sequestration.

### **Transatlantic Relations Seen in a Wider Context**

To better understand the Obama Administration's position on European basing, one must place this issue into a wider context of how the Administration views transatlantic relations.

President Obama has shown little affinity towards Europe. Transatlantic relations is rarely a factor in the Administration's geopolitical strategy. This is clear by the way the so-called pivot to Asia has been perceived by America's European allies.

Understandably, this has led to many questions about the U.S.'s commitment to transatlantic relations. To many in the former Warsaw Pact and the three Baltic countries, President Obama's level of interest in the region has been disappointing compared to his two predecessors. For example:

- The Clinton Administration oversaw the addition of the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary to NATO and sent thousands of American troops into harm's way to help pacify the Balkans.
- The Bush Administration saw a further seven countries join NATO and paved the way with two more countries, Albania and Croatia, to join soon after Bush's presidency.
- George Bush visited Eastern European countries seven times in his first term, compared to Obama's three. Bush visited Eastern European countries a total of 21 times during his two terms.

- As things stand, President Obama will be the first American President since the end of the Cold War not to welcome in a new member of NATO.

- To date, the new U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, has visited Europe on seven occasions. He has not visited a single Eastern European country.

While a lot of this may seem merely symbolic, perceptions and symbolism matter in international affairs.

The view that Europe's status has been downgraded under the current Administration was further reinforced by the Pentagon's most recent defense guidance. Issued in January 2012 and entitled "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," it contains barely a mention about Europe. In the whole 16-page document—one designed to give the U.S. armed forces and the civilians supporting them the Defense Secretary's broad vision and policy priorities—Europe and NATO receive only one short paragraph, and neither Europe nor NATO is mentioned in President Obama's foreword for the document.

In sum, this is a night-and-day difference between the levels of U.S. enthusiasm that existed for the region before and after President Obama entered office.

### **The Way Ahead**

Far from reducing the U.S. military presence in Europe, I believe that the Obama Administration should freeze all plans to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Europe until a proper review has been carried out and America's allies have been properly consulted. I would even go further to suggest that the U.S. should examine ways to increase the U.S. presence, especially on Europe's periphery and with allies who have been committed to Euro-Atlantic security.

Some believe that the European region is yesterday's news and that the U.S. should focus on defense and security issues in Asia. Indeed, the U.S. and its allies are facing emerging security challenges in the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, the world's economic interdependence means that factors that affect the security situation in Asia will often affect Europe. U.S. force posture in Asia and U.S. force posture in Europe are complementary. It is not a zero-sum game.

Some believe that the U.S. should not have a robust military presence in Europe because the Europeans should defend themselves and that the U.S. should not be providing a security umbrella at the expense of the American taxpayer. However, the primary objective of U.S. forces in Europe is to provide a forward-based military capability that gives U.S. decision makers timely and flexible military options in defending America and promoting American interests in the region. The U.S. contribution to the collective defense of Europe is simply a positive side effect.

The Administration's justifications for cuts in U.S. military capability in Europe do not add up. No matter how it is spun, V-22s are not a replacement for A-10s, and a rotating infantry battalion is not the same as two heavy BCTs permanently based in Europe.

The U.S. military presence in Europe deters American adversaries, strengthens allies, and protects U.S. interests. Whether preparing U.S. and allied troops and deploying them to Afghanistan or responding to a humanitarian crisis in the region, the U.S. can more quickly and effectively project power and react to the unexpected using its forward-based military capabilities in Europe.

Reducing this capability will only make America and her allies weaker on the world stage.

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