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Withdrawing U.S. Forces from Europe Weakens America

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In the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, the House of Representatives passed an amendment that called for the removal of all four U.S. Army Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) currently based in Europe. It is likely that a similar amendment will be considered in the upcoming FY 2014 NDAA.

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 reduce American capabilities and influence in the region.

Obama's Cuts. In January 2012, 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 and the 172nd BCT—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 inactivation of the 170th BCT was completed early. A casing of the colors ceremony took place on October 9, 2012, marking the end of 50 years of having U.S. combat soldiers in Baumholder, Germany. The inactivation of the 172nd BCT is expected to take place in October 2013.

The 2012 Coffman–Polis amendment, which was passed by a vote of 226–196, went 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. However, this measure was not included in the Senate Conference Report and, therefore, did not make it into the NDAA.

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 the most dangerous and contested regions in the world. Although largely peaceful itself, broader Europe has physical borders with Russia, the Arctic,

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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.

Further, the U.S. recently deployed a detachment of Marines to a small American air base in Spain to form a U.S. rapid-reaction force for the North African region. This deployment is clearly linked to last year’s brutal terrorist attack in Benghazi, Libya, and gives the U.S. more options for responding to a crisis in the region. This deployment would not be possible if the U.S. did not already have a military presence in Europe.

Europe’s Defense Spending: A Cause for Concern. In 2012, just four of the 28 NATO members—the U.S., Estonia, the United Kingdom, and Greece—spent the required 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. France fell below the 2 percent mark in 2011, and there is concern that the U.K. will do so after 2015.

The 2011 air campaign in Libya also demonstrated Europe’s military weakness. What started off as a French–U.K. military operation had to be quickly absorbed into a NATO operation because Europe did not have the political will or military capability (without the U.S.) to see the mission through to completion.¹ Regarding Europe’s contribution to the Libya operation, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates summed it up the best:

However, while every alliance member voted for the Libya mission, less than half have participated at all, and fewer than a third have been willing to participate in the strike mission. Frankly, many of those allies sitting on the sidelines do so not because they do not want to participate, but simply because they can’t. The military capabilities simply aren’t there.²

This is mainly the result of a decrease in defense investment by the members of NATO since the end of the Cold War and the lack of political will to use military capability when and where it is needed.

The decline in Europe’s military capability should be a serious concern for U.S. policymakers. However, Europe’s military and defense decline is no excuse for the U.S. to reduce its own capabilities. The U.S. has unique security interests around the European region that require a robust U.S. force presence regardless of Europe’s military capabilities.

The Next Steps. U.S. military bases in Europe provide American leaders with increased flexibility, resilience, and options in a dangerous world. As part of a policy that is shrinking America’s military presence in the world, the Obama Administration’s defense cuts heavily impact the U.S. military footprint in Europe. Ultimately, these cuts will reduce the ability and flexibility of the U.S. to react to the unexpected in places on Europe’s periphery, such as North Africa.

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

1. See Luke Coffey, “The 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago: NATO in Need of American Leadership,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2690, May 16, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/05/the-2012-nato-summit-in-chicago-nato-in-need-of-american-leadership> (accessed May 22, 2013).

2. Robert M. Gates, “The Security and Defense Agenda (Future of NATO),” speech delivered in Brussels, Belgium, June 10, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1581> (accessed May 20, 2013).

allies who have been committed to Euro-Atlantic security, such as Georgia.

A Real Bargain. The U.S. military presence in Europe deters American adversaries, strengthens allies, and protects American interests. The basing and support cost of the almost 50,000 U.S. troops in Germany cost \$4 billion last year.³ That is less than 1 percent of the overall defense budget.

Whether preparing U.S. and allied troops for Afghanistan or responding to an unexpected crisis

in the region, the U.S. can project power and react to the unexpected because of its forward-based military capabilities in Europe. Reducing these capabilities would only weaken America on the world stage.

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3. Donna Cassata, "Report: U.S. Footing Greater Bill for Overseas Bases," Associated Press, April 17, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/report-us-footing-greater-bill-overseas-bases> (accessed May 20, 2013).