

Reducing U.S. Troops in Europe Would Harm America's National Interests

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

U.S. troops are stationed in Europe first and foremost to protect and advance American national security interests, as well as crucial American economic interests.

Reducing U.S. troops in Europe would denigrate significant U.S. advances in bolstering collective defense in Europe and ultimately undercut transatlantic security.

The Trump Administration should not undo its accomplishments of enhancing the U.S. presence in Europe. Rather, it should maintain, or add to, current troop levels.

President Donald Trump has reportedly directed the Department of Defense to reduce the number of U.S. soldiers in Germany by 9,500—roughly 28 percent of the force currently stationed in the country.¹ This reduction would denigrate the significant efforts the Administration has made in bolstering collective defense in Europe, while ultimately undercutting transatlantic security moving forward. The U.S. should maintain, or even increase, the number of forces it has in Europe. Additionally, Congress should endeavor to block any attempt to remove forces from Europe.

The U.S. Army in Europe

At its peak during the Cold War, the U.S. had stationed approximately 300,000 soldiers across Europe. After the end of the Cold War, U.S. Presidents faced with

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budgetary pressure slashed the numbers of forces stationed in Europe—the bulk of which came from the U.S. Army. Under the Obama Administration, the U.S. deactivated two brigade combat teams permanently stationed in Europe, removing 10,500 soldiers, and at one point removed all U.S. main battle tanks from the continent.² By the time of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the U.S. had only 30,000 permanently stationed soldiers in Europe.³ Today, 34,000 U.S. soldiers are stationed permanently on the continent.

So far during his first term, President Trump has enhanced and increased the U.S. military presence in Europe. There are now more permanently based U.S. troops in Europe, more pre-positioned stockpiles, more U.S. troops forward deployed in places like Poland, more patrols in the Black Sea, more U.S. forces rotating to Europe, and more training exercises than under the Obama Administration. As recently as last year, the Trump Administration announced a plan to reactivate the Army’s V Corps, which has been habitually associated with Germany, and plans to rotate 200 soldiers to Europe with that Corps headquarters. Even with the Trump Administration’s cuts to European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) funding in fiscal years 2020 and 2021, EDI spending is still considerably higher than it was during the previous Administration.

In addition to boosting the U.S. military presence in Europe, the Administration has had success in moving NATO allies toward spending more on defense. North Atlantic Treaty Organization defense spending continues to trend upward: “2019 marked the fifth consecutive year of growth in defense spending for European Allies and Canada, with an increase in real terms of 4.6% from 2018 to 2019.”⁴

U.S. National Interests

Considering everything that the Trump Administration has done to improve America’s defense posture in Europe, the recent media reports about reducing America’s troop presence in Europe are both puzzling and concerning.

The commonly held belief that U.S. forces are in Europe to protect European allies from a threat that no longer exists is wrong. U.S. troops are in Europe first and foremost for 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 America’s European allies.

From the Arctic to the Levant, from the Maghreb to the Caucasus, Europe is at one of the most important crossroads of the world. This region also has some of the world's most vital shipping lanes, energy resources, and trade choke points. Most of these regions have long histories of instability, and a potential for future instability that could directly affect the security interests and economic well-being of the United States and its allies.

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. The U.S. needs to have the tools available to react to events in America's interests. The Department of Defense's new National Defense Strategy places a very high premium on having sufficient forward stationed forces in place for both deterrence and warfighting.⁵ Hence, a robust and capable presence of U.S. military forces in Europe is just as important today as it was during the Cold War.

A Stable Europe Is Important to the U.S.

Some of America's oldest and closest allies are in Europe. The U.S. shares with this region a strong commitment to the rule of law, human rights, free markets, and democracy. Many of these ideas, the foundations on which America was built, were brought over by the millions of immigrants from Europe in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. During the course of the 20th century, millions of Americans have fought, and many have died, for a free and secure Europe.

A stable, secure, and economically viable Europe is in America's direct economic interest. For more than 70 years, NATO and the U.S. military presence in Europe have contributed to European stability, which has economically benefited both Europeans and Americans. The economies of Europe, along with the United States, account for approximately half of the global economy. The U.S. and Europe are each other's principal trading partners. The U.S. and Europe are each other's top source of foreign direct investment. All of this brings untold benefits to the U.S. economy and, by extension, the American worker.

Currently, Russia poses a threat to European stability not seen since the Cold War. As the 2017 National Security Strategy states, "Russia seeks to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders," and "Russia is investing in new military capabilities, including nuclear systems that remain the most significant existential threat to the United States."⁶

Russia has demonstrated an ability and willingness to change borders by force: in 2008, by invading Georgia and occupying 20 percent of its territory; likewise in 2014, when Russia invaded Ukraine and illegally annexed Crimea. This was the first time since 1945 that a European border were changed by military force. In addition to these actions, continued belligerent statements by President Vladimir Putin, Russia's adventurism in Syria and Libya, and its abrogation of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty leave no room for doubt about Russian intentions.

Recommendations for the Administration and Congress

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 for *defending America and promoting American interests* in the broader European region.

The Trump Administration should not undo the progress it has made in enhancing the U.S. presence in Europe. The Trump Administration should:

- **Maintain, or add to, current U.S. troop levels in Europe.** The presence of U.S. troops in Europe is first and foremost about *American* national interests. With all the security challenges along Europe's periphery, and with a revisionist Russia threatening the U.S. and its NATO allies, American military capability in Europe should be increased, not reduced.
- **Immediately clarify the future status of U.S. forces in Europe.** Speculation about the recent media reports creates division and anxiety inside the NATO alliance. This only benefits Russia. The U.S. should clarify with its NATO partners where it stands on the issue of U.S. troops in Europe. Any decision to increase or reduce the number of U.S. troops in Europe must be made only after detailed and wide consultation with America's allies.

The U.S. Congress should:

- **Block funding for the removal of U.S. troops from Europe.** Closing bases and removing U.S. troops from Europe will not be cheap

when considering the cost of building new infrastructure in the U.S. for any returning units and the up-front cost of closing down facilities in Europe. Congress should also be prepared to block any funding to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Europe.

- **Demand a report from the Department of Defense on the risks to U.S. security interests from reducing troops.** Any decision to reduce the number of troops in Europe should not be based on a political whim. Instead, there must be a strategic assessment about the need of forward deployed forces in Europe and the threats that could emerge if they are withdrawn.

Conclusion

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, history has shown that 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 weaker on the world stage. America's economic and security interests require a stable Europe, and it is the U.S. military presence in Europe that helps to maintain European stability.

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Endnotes

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