

BULLETIN

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Transformation of the U.S. Military Posture in Europe

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Transformation of the U.S. military posture in Europe has led to deep cuts in the numbers of troops and military installations. It had no effect on the geographic structure of the standing U.S. military presence. Troop levels will remain unchanged in the medium term. The United States will increasingly opt for providing reassurance to and ensuring interoperability with European allied forces via means that are both less costly and better attuned to the American perception of threats to European security.

According to a communiqué from the U.S. Department of Defense in early April, the current structure of U.S. land forces stationed in Europe, traditionally the backbone of American military posture, will remain intact until 2015. It will be built around four brigade combat teams (BCTs), which constitute the basic deployable components of the U.S. Army. The total number of U.S. troops will level out at about 80,000, including 43,000 land forces, 31,000 air forces and 4,000 navy forces. One of the BCTs will be withdrawn in 2015, leading to a decrease in the number of land forces by 5,000 troops. It thus accounts for an amendment of earlier plans, which foresaw the withdrawal of two BCTs, but remains in line with the long-term transformation of U.S. overseas military presence. The geography of the U.S. military posture remains unchanged compared with the Cold War period: 96% of troops are stationed in Western Europe (Germany, Italy, United Kingdom and Belgium), with Germany hosting nearly 90% of the U.S. Army and 50% of the U.S. Air Force in Europe.

Global Posture Review: the Case for Europe. The bulk of changes to the U.S. military posture in Europe took place between 1991 and 2004. That period witnessed the withdrawal of 200,000 out of 315,000 troops. The number of U.S. military sites—including both installations intended to serve purely military purposes, e.g., airfields, barracks, munitions and fuel dumps, and facilities necessary to accommodate the standing presence of large groupings of military forces, such as schools or housing for the members of the armed forces—declined from more than 1,400 to nearly 490. The changes were fuelled by the diminution of prospects for a large-scale military conflict in Europe and the widening of tasks assigned to U.S. armed forces stationed overseas. The United States continued to emphasize the value of a standing military presence as a means for maintaining the political and military cohesiveness of NATO and retaining a voice on issues of importance to European security, but American forces in Europe—thus far focused on tasks associated with stationary defence—were expected to aid a response to a hypothetical crisis beyond the Euro-Atlantic area. In fact, the prospect of deploying the units stationed in Europe during overseas contingencies reinforced the voices opting for the relocation of these forces back to the United States—a less costly solution, especially when applied to more heavily equipped units.

The current stage of the transformation of U.S. force posture in Europe began in 2004 with the announcement of the Global Posture Review (GPR). The Bush administration foresaw further cuts in troop levels, intending to bring them down from 112,000 to 70,000 members and keeping two BCTs assigned to bases in Europe. The number of military installations was to drop by 40%. In addition, the structure of permanent U.S. facilities, which at the time centred on the so-called Main Operating Bases, would be expanded via a network of Forward Operating Sites. The concept of a Forward Operating Site foresaw equipping these facilities with rudimentary equipment, fit to accommodate a limited force on a rotational basis, e.g., during joint exercises. As a rule, these bases would remain under the sole authority of host nations, thus putting a relatively modest price tag on the actual deployments of American forces. Forward Operating Sites would be utilised both by units

stationed in the continental United States and those permanently deployed in Western Europe. On the one hand, these designs relied on a continuously positive assessment of the European security environment and growing operational demands in the wider Middle East. On the other hand, they stemmed from an animus to increase the level of interoperability with the armed forces of new NATO member states, mainly with a view to boost their readiness and capabilities to engage in U.S.-led overseas operations.

As of late 2009, the consolidation of U.S. military facilities led to a drop in their overall number to 400. The vast majority of these sites are located in several key areas for the standing presence of the U.S. Army (in Germany at Baumholder, Grafenwoehr, Hof and Vilseck and in Italy at Vicenza) and the U.S. Air Force (in Germany at airbases in Ramstein and Spangdahlem; in Italy at Aviano and Sigonella; in the United Kingdom at Lakenheath and Mildenhall; and, in Turkey at Incirlik).

In line with the concept of Forward Operating Sites, the United States gained access to military bases in Bulgaria (airbases in Bezmer and Graf Ignatievo and barracks and a training area in Novo Selo in the Sliven province) and Romania (an airbase in Constanca and a base in Babadag). So far, the facilities have been used by units readying for deployment to Afghanistan. The airbases have been outfitted to host detachments of combat aircraft, as well as airlift units and air tankers. Similar arrangements are at work in the military base in Urosevac (Kosovo), currently serving the U.S. task force engaged in the KFOR operation. The base features basic facilities, sufficient to host a limited rotational force, while being ready to provide a temporary stationing ground for a much larger force ahead of an overseas combat deployment. The U.S. financed the construction or modernization of these sites, but they remain the property of local authorities.

The original plan to have the number of BCTs slashed to two had to be modified for reasons of politics and logistics. Following the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008, the merits of stationing just two BCTs in Europe began to be put into question on several accounts. First, the plan was challenged in U.S. military circles on the grounds that it would not allow the U.S. to provide a credible guarantee against a possible aggressor in the Euro-Atlantic space. Second, it was unclear whether such a structure of land forces would be flexible enough to maintain interoperability with European allies. Finally, American diplomats in Europe warned that such a move would limit the extent of leverage the United States would have on matters pertinent to European security. As a result, in February 2010 the Obama administration decided to withhold the decision concerning the future number of BCTs, at least until the adoption of the new NATO Strategic Concept and pending the renewed assessment of the future requirements for engagement in Afghanistan.

On the logistical side, it turned out that the military infrastructure in the continental United States would be insufficient to accommodate the units slated for redeployment from Europe. The process of realignment of the U.S. military facilities, launched in 2005, failed to take into account the overall increase in the number of the armed forces, driven by the requirements of ongoing overseas operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Between 2004 and 2010, the U.S. Army alone was expanded by more than 70,000 soldiers. As a result, the postponement of the GPR-mandated redeployments to at least 2012 was announced as early as December 2007 on the grounds of logistic shortcomings. The priority for 2011 is to withdraw additional units from Iraq, most of which are permanently stationed in the United States. All in all, the number of BCTs in Europe will fall to three only after the expected termination of the combat mission in Afghanistan (2014), when the abatement in the operational tempo will allow for a decrease in the overall number of armed forces. It can be reasonably expected that enhancements in military infrastructure will have been completed by that time.

Prospects. The latest decisions concerning the structure of U.S. land forces in Europe do not end the debate over the long-term American military presence there, with fiscal constraints likely to play a key role. Prolonged deployment of a larger-than-expected number of troops is already generating additional costs, unaccounted for by the GPR. In April 2011, President Obama announced cuts in U.S. defence spending in the range of \$400 billion in coming years. Already in November 2010, the so-called fiscal commission created by Obama to provide recommendations for ways to cut federal deficits floated the idea of closing one-third of the U.S. military installations overseas. The temptation to find necessary savings via further reductions in the military posture in Europe will grow in the light of a generally positive assessment of European security. This trend will be further reinforced by progress in the deployment of capabilities such as missile defence, which the U.S. deems more appropriate to tackle the most acute threats to NATO allies in the coming years, while at the same time providing the necessary level of political and military reassurance—the key value associated with the continuation of an American military presence. The plans for deploying a U.S. Air Force detachment to Poland would not be affected. Its presence most likely would draw upon the arrangements used in Bulgaria and Romania, thus remaining in line with a tendency by the United States to retain the status of “European power” in a more cost-efficient manner.