

# President Biden Should Keep U.S. Troops in Europe

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

President Biden announced that he is halting the Trump Administration's planned U.S. troop withdrawal from Germany until further review. This is good news.

American forces should only be present in locations where that presence serves vital American interests. In Europe, that presence is warranted.

U.S. troops are in Europe first and foremost to protect U.S. economic and national security interests. Reducing U.S. presence would only undermine those interests.

Last summer, the Trump Administration directed the Department of Defense to reduce the number of U.S. personnel in Germany by 11,900.<sup>1</sup> During his first foreign policy speech as President, Joe Biden announced that he is halting the Trump Administration's planned U.S. troop withdrawal from Germany until the Department of Defense completes a Global Posture Review of U.S. forces.

This is good news, as a reduction of U.S. forces in Europe would send the wrong message to U.S. allies and adversaries. Most important, such a move would ultimately undercut U.S. interests in the transatlantic region. 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 unless questions regarding the utility of the move are satisfactorily answered.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib6049>

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## The U.S. Army in Europe

At its peak during the Cold War, the U.S. had stationed approximately 400,000 troops across Europe.<sup>2</sup> After the end of the Cold War, U.S. Presidents faced with budgetary pressure slashed the numbers of forces—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.<sup>3</sup> By the time Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, the U.S. had only 30,000 permanently stationed service members in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Today, around 64,000 active-duty U.S. troops are stationed permanently on the continent.<sup>5</sup>

In July 2020, the Trump Administration announced a plan for further troop reductions in Germany. According to then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, the plan was to reposition 11,900 personnel from Germany to other locations—the majority of which would be in the U.S. According to Secretary Esper:

- The move would have reduced the number of U.S. military personnel in Germany from about 36,000 to 24,000.
- About 5,600 service members would have moved from Germany to Belgium and Italy.
- An additional 6,400 personnel would have returned to the United States.
- No plans were announced for any of the troops leaving Germany to be permanently repositioned to places on the frontlines of Russian aggression, such as Poland, Romania, or the Baltic states.

At the time of the announcement, there were mixed messages from the Pentagon and the White House for the justification of these troop reductions. The Pentagon curiously claimed that the troop withdrawal from Germany, including moving 6,400 troops back to the U.S., “enhances deterrence and improves operational flexibility.”<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, President Donald Trump told reporters, “We don’t want to be the suckers any more. The United States has been taken advantage of for 25 years, both on trade and on the military. So we’re reducing the force because they’re not paying their bills.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it was clear that the financial cost of the changes had not been

fully thought out, with Secretary Esper telling reporters in July that exact cost figures were not available, but that he believed the moves could cost somewhere in the “single digit” billions.<sup>8</sup>

## U.S. National Interests

The commonly held belief that U.S. forces are in Europe to protect European allies from a threat that no longer exists is wrong: (1) U.S. troops are in Europe first and foremost for U.S. national security interests. (2) The threat of Russian aggression persists.

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. These regions also have 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 to react to events that threaten America’s interest. The Department of Defense’s National Defense Strategy places a very high premium on having sufficient forward-stationed forces in place for both deterrence and warfighting.<sup>9</sup> 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, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (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 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."<sup>10</sup>

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 was 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 Biden Administration and Congress 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.

- **Establish a permanent military presence in Eastern Europe.** For many NATO members in Eastern Europe, Russia presents an existential and omnipresent threat. Nowhere is this threat felt more acutely than in the Baltic Sea and Black Sea regions. While rotational forces have helped to bolster deterrence in these regions, they are an unequal substitute for permanently stationed forces. A robust, permanent presence in the Baltic Sea and Black Sea regions would display the U.S.'s long-term resolve to live up to its NATO treaty commitments.
- **Take a long-term view of U.S. presence in Europe.** U.S. policy-makers should consider the importance of deployments to important European locations in strategic terms, recognizing their continued current value, while also gazing at horizons 20 years to 30 years from now and recognizing that maintaining a robust presence is a sage investment in light of challenges posed by great-power rivals China and Russia.<sup>11</sup>
- **Make the case as to why the U.S. forces need to remain in Europe.** U.S. leaders should consistently explain to the American public why deployments of U.S. military personnel overseas advances U.S. national interests. Furthermore, when possible, policymakers should highlight specific examples of how overseas basing benefits American service members and U.S. taxpayers. For example, the proximity of Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Ramstein, Germany, to the battlefields of the Middle East has saved the lives of numerous American service members over the past 20 years.

## 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, 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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