A Military Drawdown in Germany? US Force Posture in Europe from Trump to Biden

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The Biden administration has promised to revitalize a transatlantic alliance that has experienced much strain during Donald Trump's presidency. Trump's focus on strategic competition with China, equivocal attitude toward Russia, repeated criticisms of NATO and Germany, and insistence that Europeans pay for their own defense have raised questions about the future of US defense strategy in Europe. Nevertheless, his administration in fact committed additional money and troops to deterring Russia from threatening US allies. Amid such confusing signals, one of Trump's last acts that roiled transatlantic relations was to announce in July 2020 a plan to reduce military personnel stationed in Germany from about 34,500 to 25,000, return some portion of these troops to the United States, regroup some air and command assets in Italy and Belgium, and reinforce the US military's rotational presence in Poland and the Black Sea region. The announcement of these measures stunned European allies, who had not been previously consulted.

The Pentagon's 2020 plan embodied the main themes and contradictions that characterized Trump's defense strategy in Europe: its net reduction of US forces reflected Europe's downgraded strategic importance to Washington, partly explained by the need to prioritize Asia and partly by the belief that Europeans must be responsible for their own defense; it punished Germany; and it sought
to rebalance US force posture in Europe with a view to emphasize NATO’s eastern flank and the value of rotational forces. Ultimately, this plan dovetailed with the Trump administration’s efforts to hollow out NATO as a multilateral alliance, focusing instead on strengthening bilateral and sub-regional co-operation with select European countries.2

The Biden administration has now put the Pentagon’s 2020 plan “on hold” and promised to “re-examine every single one” of its elements “from cradle to grave” as it conducts a broader US global posture review in the course of 2021.3 This turn of events is unsurprising. After all, Biden has repeatedly promised to repair US alliances and has been particularly critical of Trump’s approach to NATO and Germany. As he wrote in Foreign Affairs, “NATO is at the very heart of the United States’ national security, and it is the bulwark of the liberal democratic ideal—an alliance of values, which makes it far more durable, reliable, and powerful than partnerships built by coercion or cash.”4 Members of the Biden administration like Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks even publicly dismissed the Pentagon’s 2020 plan as simply punishment against Germany, weakening NATO’s cohesion and undermining deterrence against Russia.5

In light of the Biden administration’s decision to put the Pentagon’s 2020 plan on hold, what does the future hold for US force posture in Europe? Certain elements of the Pentagon’s 2020 plan are indeed strategically flawed and politically questionable, such as the decision to single out Germany and not consult European allies. Yet that does not mean everything in the plan should be discarded. The status quo force posture is not necessarily fit for purpose, and the Biden administration should not throw potentially good ideas out with the bad ones.

Ultimately, the Pentagon’s 2020 plan for US force posture in Europe embodies two trends that will arguably persist no matter who resides in the White House in the years to come. The first is that, since the Cold War ended, the United States has been steadily drawing down forces from Europe. This drawdown has been possible and worth doing because the military requirements for deterrence in Europe have softened and Washington’s international political goals have changed. The second is that US policy documents have consistently emphasized the need to shift from mass to agility
—that is, by having leaner and more agile forces deployed abroad instead of mass concentrations of military power garrisoned overseas.

In this essay, we explore what Biden’s presidency might mean for US force posture in Europe by taking the controversial 2020 plan the Pentagon unveiled under his predecessor as a point of departure. We argue that the Biden administration should not flatly dismiss the Pentagon’s 2020 plan. Critically, it addresses changing geostrategic realities—namely, the need to prioritize Asia over Europe, to shift forces within the European theater toward East Central Europe, and to continue the broader military shift from mass to agility. These trends will not disappear, and pressures to adjust US force posture in Europe will remain. Of course, as the Biden administration ponders the future of the Pentagon’s 2020 plan, greater intra-alliance consultation and some adjustments will be necessary. Determining the merits of relying on rotational deployments, and how they may affect deterrence and assurance, is one key issue to consider. But the plan should not be dismissed out of hand simply because it was made during the previous administration.

A Controversial Plan

For much of the Trump administration’s mandate, observers anticipated a major shift in how the United States would structure its force posture in Europe. After all, during both his first presidential campaign and his time in the Oval Office, Trump routinely bashed European allies for not bearing their share of the collective defense burden while bemoaning unfair trade deals. Allegedly, Trump even wanted to go as far as to withdraw from NATO, before being convinced not to do so by his advisors.6

Despite such alarm over Trump’s intentions toward Europe, the US military presence there remained stable. Following the 2016 Warsaw Summit, under the leadership of President Barack Obama, the United States agreed to lead a battalion-sized battlegroup stationed in Poland as part of the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltic region. Comprising about 670 US troops as of October 2020, this commitment became operational in northeastern Poland just before Trump took office.7 Since January 2017, the United States also has had a rotational US Armored Brigade Combat Team, consisting of about 3,000 troops, to complement the eFP battlegroup. Even after Trump took office, the US Army stood up in Germany an additional 1,500 soldiers, including a field artillery brigade headquarters, two multiple launch rocket system battalions, a short-range air defense battalion, and their supporting units.8

However, fears regarding US commitments to Europe still lingered given the gap between military operations and the rhetoric coming from the White House.
Those fears finally seemed validated amid reports in June 2020 of plans by the Trump administration to withdraw 9,500 US military personnel from Europe within several months. Details remained vague, however, until late July when Secretary of Defense Mark Esper confirmed that the US presence in Germany would shrink to 25,000 from 34,500. According to the plan, about 5,600 of these personnel would have been redeployed to other parts of Europe, with the rest returning to the United States, including the 4,500-strong 2nd Calvary Regiment. This particular brigade would have eventually rotated to the Black Sea region—whether as a whole or in part was never clarified. The plan also envisioned relocating Europe Command (EUCOM) and Special Operations Command (SOCOM) Europe from Germany to Mons, Belgium, where NATO headquarters is situated. An F-16 air force fighter squadron would have also been moved from Germany to Italy, along with a full airborne brigade.

The Trump administration offered several reasons to justify the planned drawdown. Trump himself publicly linked the decision to Germany’s low defense spending, arguing that the country is “not paying its bills” and is “very delinquent.”9 His National Security Advisor, Robert O’Brien, highlighted the need to prioritize the Indo-Pacific region.10 But according to the Pentagon, the relocation of key command assets like EUCOM and SOCOM to Belgium would facilitate interaction and coordination between US and NATO commands. Likewise, regrouping two battalions of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team with their brigade headquarters in Vicenza, Italy and moving the US Air Force’s F-16 fleet would amount to a concentration of units that are at present geographically distant, purportedly enhancing unity of command.11 Finally, the announcement to rotate the lead element of the Army’s 5th Corps headquarters to Poland and a Stryker brigade to the Black Sea region promised to consolidate US efforts to strengthen its military position alongside Europe’s northeastern flank. Indeed, although it was negotiated independently of any planned or threatened adjustments to the US military presence in Germany, Washington concluded an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with Warsaw that, among other things, creates a new forward division command in Poland, envisions the deployment of Reaper drones and the rotational presence of an Army Aviation Brigade, and establishes other military facilities.12

None of the arguments put forward by the Trump administration have satisfied the critics. The redeployment of certain units would mean that new (and costly) facilities must be built when they already exist in Germany. Some observers have seized on Trump’s burden-sharing comments to note that some of the troops in Germany would be moved to Italy or Belgium, two allies that spend even less on defense as a proportion of their gross domestic product.13 The implication is that the drawdown is unrelated to burden-sharing, reflecting instead Trump’s own fixation with Germany or personal dislike of Chancellor Angela Merkel.
Critics denounced the drawdown as “a gift to the Kremlin” and “a political decision not based on any strategic analysis.”

Upon taking office, the Biden administration has put the Pentagon’s 2020 plan for Europe on hold as it conducts a global review of US force posture. This decision is unsurprising. During the election campaign, Biden repeatedly affirmed his support for NATO and pledged to deepen cooperation with US allies, while key members of his campaign and transition teams publicly criticized the Pentagon’s 2020 plan for Europe. Kathleen Hicks, Biden’s Deputy Secretary of Defense, once described the plan as being “about a personal grudge against Germany.” The fact that the Biden administration appears particularly keen on resetting US-German and transatlantic relations would arguably explain its early decision to suspend the Pentagon’s 2020 plan. To be sure, the fate of the 2020 plan for Europe will remain unknown until the Pentagon concludes its Global Force Posture Review. Yet public criticism on the part of Biden and some of his key advisors suggests the administration may at the very least dismiss some of the elements of the plan, especially those that are perceived to be punitive toward Germany. Options could range between simply reducing the number of troops that are pulled out of Germany or fully canceling the plan.

Canceling this concept would not end the story, however. After all, the Pentagon sought to produce a concept that reconciled Trump’s determination to punish Germany via a troop withdrawal with broader plans to streamline US force posture in Europe to meet the evolving demands of deterrence. Thus, the Trump administration opted for a package that goes beyond mere withdrawal—one that consolidates commands and units within Europe as well as relocates some forces to East Central Europe, albeit on a rotational basis. Those elements respond to broader trends that would continue to influence the US military posture in Europe, no matter who sits in the Oval Office.

**Trends in US Force Posture in Europe**

The Pentagon’s 2020 plan embodies two major trends that have long come to characterize US force posture in Europe. These trends will persist into the medium to long term.

**Drawing Down Forces**

Setting aside the alarmed reaction it elicited, the Pentagon’s plan fits the larger story of the US military presence in Europe since the Cold War ended. This story has been one of gradual downsizing, as shown in Figure 1, with much of this drawdown initially due to the Soviet Union’s collapse. Not only did this singular geopolitical event entail the evacuation of ex-Soviet forces from East Central
Europe, it also allowed all of its former Warsaw Pact allies to integrate themselves into Western institutions like NATO. To grasp the significance of these changes for US objectives in Europe, it is worth briefly reviewing why Washington has been so involved on the continent in the first place and how the reasons for being so have changed after the Cold War ended.

Arguably, the main objective for the United States in Europe has been to preserve a balance of power on that continent—that is, to ensure that no other power can dominate Europe and thus be able to monopolize its economic, industrial, and military resources. Even in 2017, the Trump administration’s National Security Strategy warned that “[c]hanges in a regional balance of power can have global consequences and threaten U.S. interests,” adding that “[t]he United States must marshal the will and capabilities to compete and prevent unfavorable shifts in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East.”

Throughout the Cold War, the main threat to the balance of power was the Soviet Union; the means to deal with it were mostly military and competitive. Still, many disagreements that arose within NATO revolved around which strategies were best suited for addressing the Soviet challenge and what contributions allies should make toward the collective defense burden.

From Washington’s perspective, the military necessity of staying in Europe during the Cold War centered largely on three interrelated pillars. The first was deterrence, which required the ability and willingness to impose unacceptable costs on the Soviet Union such that it would not launch an attack on West Germany and other parts of Europe free from communist control. Unacceptable costs would have taken the form of nuclear reprisal or major Soviet battlefield

Figure 1. US Military Personnel in Europe and Germany, 1950–2020

![Graph showing US military personnel in Europe and Germany, 1950–2020](image-url)
losses. The second was defense: if deterrence were to fail, and the Soviet Union did attack, then US and allied forces would have needed the ability to fight back, doing no worse (hopefully) than reaching a painful stalemate. The third pillar was reassurance. Forward deployed military forces signaled to US allies that Washington had “skin in the game” because it would be less likely to retreat from a military confrontation with Moscow—dead US soldiers would generate pressures for escalation, which could involve nuclear weapons. Given the numerical superiority of Warsaw Pact forces, arrayed as they were in East Germany, a strong military posture comprising US military and allied forces in West Germany served deterrence, defense, and reassurance purposes. Over one quarter of a million US military personnel were stationed at one point in West Germany.

By engaging in this three-fold military mission, Washington also sought to dissipate any pressures for autonomy coming from its European allies. This desire was especially important early in the Cold War when the United States was eager for West Germany to remilitarize under NATO auspices, thereby strengthening anti-communist Europe while brailing potential West German revisionism. Of course, doubts regarding US security commitments sometimes became so intense as to incite West Germany to seek a European solution or more autonomy, as when Washington appeared poised to downsize the US Army amid Soviet ballistic missile efforts in the late 1950s.

Nevertheless, a strong US military presence in West Germany buttressed a strong political-military relationship between Berlin and Washington, providing a foundation to Europe’s security architecture. Comprising large detachments of US Army and Air Force units, relevant commands, and nuclear weapons, this military presence was arguably critical to deterring a Soviet attack. At the same time, Washington’s commitment to West Germany and the latter’s strong anchoring in NATO set clear limits to discussions for European autonomy in defense and security matters, which could have entailed neutrality, as advocated by some in West Germany, or an independent strategic center, as typically advocated by French leaders.

The Soviet Union’s collapse meant that the political and military demands for US engagement in Europe changed. Deterrence, defense, and reassurance assumed reduced importance for European security affairs. With the Russian military shrinking back to a home territory that had shifted farther east, given the newfound sovereignty of Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltic states, US defense planning was no longer animated by concerns of major armored assaults sweeping into West Germany. It drew down its forces from Europe accordingly.
Still, amid deep uncertainty over Europe's future stability, Washington did not withdraw all of its forces from the continent. This uncertainty in the 1990s largely revolved around the fate of those countries previously under communist control and whether they would become relatively stable liberal democracies or anarchic zones of ethnic conflict. Some scholars argue that the United States retained a presence in order to discourage Western European initiatives toward strategic autonomy. Furthermore, although Washington worked with Moscow on arms control and provided it with economic aid packages to advance market reforms, Russia’s long-term commitment to regional peace and stability remained in doubt. The 1994 US Nuclear Posture Review, for example, declared that “the United States seeks both to cooperate with Russia wherever such cooperation is possible, and to prepare realistically for possible tensions or disruptions of that relationship.” Finally, US Army soldiers and equipment in Europe were instrumental to the success of Operation Desert Storm, which had aimed at expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

This experience highlighted the power-projection potential of US military forces in Europe to nearby regional theaters. Many US military operations in the Middle East and North Africa since the 1990s have depended on logistical support based in Europe. This support became particularly important in the context of the post-9/11 Global War on Terror, which led to significant US military deployments in the broader Middle East throughout the 2010s. But by the end of its two-term mandate, the Bush administration completed a major reduction of US Army personnel from Europe all the same.

Upon arriving in power, President Barack Obama promised to reduce—and eventually end—the US military commitment in the Middle East and concentrate its strategic attention more on the Asia-Pacific. To be sure, this turn toward the Asia-Pacific had already begun late in his predecessor George W. Bush’s presidency. Nevertheless, Obama’s focus on the Asia-Pacific came mostly at the expense of the Middle East, even as the challenges associated with a swift withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan raised questions about the ability of the United States to rebalance its military posture toward Asia. At the same time, US military presence in Europe saw additional reductions—the most notable being Obama’s 2012 decision to remove two US Army brigades from Germany.

Deterrence, defense, and reassurance, however, returned to the European security agenda in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and instigated a war in eastern Ukraine shortly thereafter. Those countries located in NATO’s northeastern flank—specifically, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland—beseeched their allies to provide support lest Russia would target them next. By themselves, these four countries would have been unable to defeat a serious military challenge to their territorial integrity by Russia. After all, Russia benefited from a military
modernization process dating back to the mid-2000s and outmatched the capabilities of those countries located on its western frontier.\textsuperscript{33} The 2014 and 2016 NATO summits in Wales and Warsaw, respectively, sought to address this security challenge, leading the United States to pre-position military hardware in the Baltic region, send rotational forces to Poland and elsewhere in the region, and invest in local military infrastructure via the European Reassurance Initiative (later called the European Deterrence Initiative).\textsuperscript{34} US and NATO efforts to reassure allies in the northeastern flank and strengthen deterrence vis-à-vis Russia began late in the Obama administration and were expanded during the Trump years.

\textbf{From Mass to Agility}

The Pentagon’s concept for readjusting US military posture in Europe is also consistent with its long-stated aim to achieve greater agility and flexibility in overseas deployments. Ever since the Cold War ended, the Department of Defense has sought to transform how the United States structures its forces. Specifically, the Pentagon has embraced a concept of US force posture and projection that de-emphasizes the use of large and heavy bases overseas concentrated in a number of select countries, in favor of having smaller, more agile and geographically disperse detachments of US forces. The 1997 \textit{Quadrennial Defense Review} (QDR) asserted that the Pentagon “must be leaner, more efficient, and more cost effective in order to serve the warfighter faster, better, and cheaper.”\textsuperscript{35} The 2001 QDR, published shortly after the September 11 attacks, further advised that “[a] transformed U.S. force must be matched by a support structure that is equally agile, flexible, and innovative.” It observed that the “overseas presence posture, concentrated in Western Europe and Northeast Asia, is inadequate for the new strategic environment, in which US interests are global and potential threats in other areas of the world are emerging.”\textsuperscript{36} The 2006 QDR reaffirmed this last point. In evaluating efforts made since the previous QDR, it noted that “we also have been adjusting the US global military force posture, making long overdue adjustments to U.S. basing by moving away from a static defense in obsolete Cold War garrisons, and placing emphasis on the ability to surge quickly to trouble spots across the globe.”\textsuperscript{37}

Because of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing peace dividend, geopolitical and military-strategic considerations drove the Pentagon’s conceptual shift from mass to agility. Geopolitically, the absence of a superpower competitor reignited debates about retrenchment in the United States, as the strategic logic of sizable and permanent US deployments overseas became subject to greater criticism.\textsuperscript{38} During this purported unipolar moment, many analysts of different intellectual persuasions agreed that Washington would prefer
more ad hoc security partnerships so that it could flexibly handle security threats as they arose. At the military-strategic level, the so-called Revolution of Military Affairs (RMA) heralded the primacy of information technology and put a premium on versatility and speed. Responsible for overseeing the 2001 and 2006 QDRs, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld believed that the RMA meant that the US military did not need the same level of manpower as before to create strategic effects, a view that proved controversial in his handling of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the subsequent occupation of Iraq. The escalating costs of weapon systems also elicited a general rebalancing from quantity to quality. US force structure thus saw significant reductions of personnel and number of platforms across all the services.

This shift in US force posture entailed two changes in deterring potential peer competitors. The first was that Washington was more confident about projecting military power over the horizon. The 2001 QDR thus argued that “[c]apabilities and forces located in the continental United States and in space are a critical element of this new global posture. Long-range strike aircraft and special operations forces provide an immediately employable supplement to forward forces to achieve a deterrent effect in peacetime.” Agility, not mass, would underpin deterrence.

The second and related change meant less reliance on overseas basing. As Rumsfeld observed, “[i]n this century, we are shifting away from a tendency to equate sheer numbers of things—tanks, troops, bombs, et cetera, with capability.” New and more asymmetrical challenges demanded moving “away from large and permanent overseas garrisons toward expeditionary operations utilizing more austere bases abroad.” Enabling these changes was the fact that Russia’s military power weakened relative to that of the United States and that NATO enlargement provided greater strategic depth, at least as far as Europe was concerned.

The shift from mass to agility and the subsequent rebalancing away from sizable and heavy overseas bases affected alliance relationships. A greater emphasis was placed on rotational presence, joint training and exercising, and security provisions other than a permanent and sizable presence of US troops, such as missile or cyber defense. After 2001, the United States stepped up its arms sales, with a majority of them going toward treaty allies and security partners. President Barack Obama embraced a “light footprint” strategy and, at least notionally, rejected a “boots on the ground” approach. Accordingly, he expanded the use of drone strikes in North Africa as well as the Middle East and increased
covert cyber operations, the most newsworthy of which was the targeting of Iranian centrifuge systems with a malicious computer worm called Stuxnet.\textsuperscript{45}

To be sure, troop surges by Presidents Bush and Obama in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively, demonstrated that their commitment to agility had its limits. Still, Obama’s main priority was ultimately to end the wars that began after the September 11, 2001 attacks and to focus more on economic reconstruction.\textsuperscript{46} Even in Europe, the Obama administration withdrew two brigades from Germany and had articulated its dissatisfaction with how European allies were under-investing in their own military capabilities.\textsuperscript{47} It was initially reluctant to grant Polish requests for positioning US forces on Polish soil following the Russian annexation of Crimea, though it eventually agreed to position a brigade in southeastern Poland while leading a multinational battalion-sized battlegroup as part of NATO’s eFP. Both deployments are on a rotational basis.

In this vein, although Trump generally gave the military an expanded role in his foreign policy approach, his America First platform and criticism of allies were nevertheless aligned with an emphasis on CONUS-based capabilities and flexibility. Indeed, his commitment to strengthen the US military presence in East Central Europe from 2017 onward largely involved rotational forces.\textsuperscript{48} Notably, Trump deflected requests by Poland in 2018 to make US forces there permanent.\textsuperscript{49}

### Contemporary Deterrence and Rotational Concerns

Given that the United States has been steadily withdrawing its forces out of Europe since the Cold War ended and that the Pentagon has articulated a preference for agility over mass, the Trump administration’s proposed changes to US force posture in Europe fit within this larger historical trajectory. Yet, as the Biden administration ponders the future of the Pentagon’s 2020 plan, several questions remain: is the Pentagon plan appropriate for going about “great power competition” with Russia? Will it enhance deterrence and defense vis-à-vis Russia and help reassure NATO allies? The evidence is admittedly mixed—the concept is not as incompetent as some critics have asserted, nor as desirable as its advocates have proclaimed.

Consider first the requirements of deterrence in Europe. The view that Russia has revisionist intentions, a high pain threshold, and powerful military capabilities suggests that deterrence requirements are very high. A large forward-leaning
military presence that can offset Russian capabilities would be necessary for thwarting an attack. In contrast, deterrence would be easy and almost costless if Russia lacks hostile intent, has a low pain threshold, and possesses a weak military. Few, however, take these contrary threat assessments seriously. Considering Russia’s war in Ukraine, its subversive behavior in the Baltic region, and broader social media and electoral interference efforts (including in Western Europe and the United States), its aggression cannot be discounted even if the precise nature of Russian intentions is debatable. Some observers question whether Russia truly aspires to undertake such large-scale territorial faits accomplis as the annexation of whole countries, arguing instead that it would prefer to do much more limited grabs (e.g., border towns or islands), if at all.

Nevertheless, although major military offensives against NATO countries are unlikely, the record of Russian behavior over the course of the last decade—which includes the annexation of Crimea, the war in eastern Ukraine, extrajudicial killings on NATO territory, chemical and nuclear arms control violations, election interference, numerous airspace incursions, and disinformation campaigns—suggests that the possibility of such offensives cannot be dismissed entirely. Uncertainty exists over Russia’s own pain threshold, but Moscow’s reaction to Western diplomatic and economic pressure over its actions in Ukraine suggests a readiness to withstand pain. Of course, tolerating diplomatic and economic pain in relation to Ukraine is one thing for Moscow; tolerating the pain or risk associated with making a direct military move on a NATO ally is another.

That tolerance may itself be a function of capabilities. But aggressive and revisionist as it may be, Russia cannot project military power as much as the Soviet Union once did. At the strategic level, the United States enjoys conventional military-technological superiority over Russia and can use nuclear weapons in retaliation to any major attack. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and NATO enlargement, Moscow has also lost much of the strategic depth it had in Europe during the Cold War. Still, Russia can turn these weaknesses to its advantage. Its acquisition of precision-guided munitions has enhanced Russia’s missile architecture, underpinning what has controversially been labeled as an anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) strategy that arguably gives it local escalation dominance in parts of East Central Europe including the Baltic region. One oft-cited analysis concludes that Russia could take Tallinn and Riga in several days. To be sure, this analysis overstates the ease of land invasion given the difficulties of the boggy terrain and the narrow passageways that Russian armed forces would have to traverse in eastern Latvia and Estonia. Russian air defense capabilities may be much more limited than previously believed in its ability to create anti-access bubbles.

That said, although the 6th Combined Arms Army—the Russian field army positioned closest to Estonia and Latvia—may not be able to mount combined
arms operations in offensives against the Baltic states, Russia can still arguably use the 1st Guards Tank Army to seize parts of them, particularly if it can bring to bear supporting elements from air mobile forces and Kaliningrad-based naval infantry units.\textsuperscript{54} Russia can thus use its local escalation dominance, or its perception thereof, to split NATO. Any land assault by Russia would require expensive stockpiling and pre-planning that should be detectable and thus provide enough early warning, but the Alliance will still need military resources to respond effectively.\textsuperscript{55} A limited land-grab may just as well be a prelude for more, and bereft of those resources, the will of NATO countries to provide support to beleaguered allies in northeastern Europe may be sapped because the costs for responding are too high—in part because of Russian missile capabilities.

The deterrence requirements in NATO’s northeastern flank are thus relatively high if compared to the early 2000s—let alone the 1990s—but low if the benchmark is either the Soviet Union or even, perhaps, contemporary China. This complicates any assessment on whether the Pentagon’s 2020 concept for Europe is sufficient to meet current deterrence requirements. At first blush, a shrinking US force presence in Germany apparently weakens deterrence if it means putting US military forces farther away from the northeastern flank. Response times become longer and operational effectiveness is potentially undermined in a crisis. This aspect of the 2020 concept undermines the stated need for agility—a concept perhaps more appropriate for expeditionary operations in “secondary theaters” than for great power deterrence.

What also complicates any discussions of the future of US force posture and defense strategy in Europe is the growing missile advantage that Russia has in the northeastern flank, due to its recent advances in precision-strike technology and various delivery systems. In this regard, the termination of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) in 2019—which had prohibited land-based missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers—opens the door for Russia to develop and field additional short- and medium-range conventional missiles. By further mainstreaming its theater missile and A2/AD architecture, Russia aims to consolidate its local escalation dominance in northeastern Europe, thus raising the costs of entry in the area for the United States and its Western European allies as well as driving a wedge within NATO. Neither the status quo posture nor the 2020 Pentagon concept meaningfully addresses this missile imbalance in the northeastern flank, and discussions of US military presence in Germany have little directly to do with this adverse development.
However, the demise of the INF Treaty opens an opportunity for the United States and its allies to develop and deploy theater-range conventional missiles that hold at risk Russian military assets and complicate Russian targeting. The US Army’s initiatives to upgrade the Multiple Launch Rocket System and High Mobility Artillery Rocket System with longer-range missiles, and Polish (and Romanian) interest in that program, are relevant. The Biden administration has signaled support for arms control, but its appetite for doing anything beyond extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) is questionable given Biden’s disinclination to do a reset with Moscow. Additionally, the recent US decision to deploy a squadron of Reaper drones as part of its EDCA with Poland would improve deterrence-by-detection by reducing Russia’s ability to achieve strategic surprise. Nevertheless, such efforts need to be done in an integrative manner that fits in a larger vision for European security. At present, these efforts can seem ad hoc and loosely connected.

Another unresolved issue going forward is whether the rotation-centric construct that Washington seemingly has in mind for East Central Europe (and elsewhere) would sufficiently reassure regional allies. Failure to do so may damage relations with those allies most worried by Russia, such as Poland, and incentivize them to explore options beyond US security guarantees. It may also encourage debates in Western Europe about alternative security arrangements, whether through greater European strategic autonomy or some sort of rapprochement with Russia. In this regard, the United States is suspicious of EU defense efforts independent from NATO and has repeatedly criticized European allies (especially Germany) for their accommodating tendencies toward Russia.

Current US efforts to bolster intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) presence as well as theater missile and missile defense capabilities in the northeastern flank may well have more direct deterrence effectiveness than some of those forces in Germany that were slated to be withdrawn. However, European allies have typically associated deterrence and reassurance with the permanent presence of US troops on their soil. The reasoning for this association is straightforward: such forces demonstrate that the United States has a stake in allies’ security and combat credibility when European allies worry that Moscow could launch a fait accompli—a unilateral seizure of territory done so quickly and decisively as to dissuade a strong response. Still, in an era of precision strike, large garrisons have less military value if they can be knocked out in the opening phases of conflict. Accordingly, a greater premium exists on the dispersal and hardening of forces for the purpose of improving their survivability and spreading risk that an attacker would have to accept. This is something that the Pentagon’s 2020 plan sought to address, as it hinted at a more geographically dispersed distribution of US forces across Central and Eastern Europe, not least by leaning more on rotational forces.
A problem with rotational forces is that their impermanency makes them liable to an easier withdrawal if political leaders so demand them, thereby providing opportunities for any willing attacker to be patient enough to await their eventual departure. Moreover, rotational forces are economically costlier than permanent forces. They may have a higher training readiness advantage, but they also are often under-manned, lack familiarity with local forces and culture, and may even suffer from worse morale. Nevertheless, by moving troops eastward toward the frontline, the Pentagon’s plan promises to provide a net improvement over the status quo.

As it ponders the fate of the Pentagon’s 2020 plan and the future of US force posture in Europe more broadly, the Biden administration will need to balance carefully the need for greater engagement on the northeastern flank to strengthen deterrence vis-à-vis Russia against its willingness to reassure Germany. A general climate of reducing overseas forward-deployed forces might only further compound this dilemma even if Germany benefits from the strategic depth that its eastern neighbors do not.

Don’t Throw Out a Good Idea with the Bad

The Pentagon’s 2020 plan for US force posture in Europe, and more specifically the envisioned troop drawdown in Germany, appears to clash with Biden’s recommitment to NATO and the US-German relationship. After putting the plan on hold until a broader US global force posture review is concluded, the Biden administration may well be tempted to dismiss the entire 2020 plan as gratuitous punishment against Germany—but that would be shortsighted for reasons described above.

Given the Biden administration’s interest in mending ties with Germany, some gesture toward that country may indeed be needed. That could mean withdrawing fewer troops from Germany than originally envisioned in the Pentagon’s 2020 plan, an increase in joint US-German military training and exercises, or other such mitigating measures. It could also mean scrapping the previously mentioned F-16 squadron redeployment from Germany to Italy, which indeed had a dubious military motivation in that it would streamline command and control. If nothing else, the Biden administration must consult Germany and other allies on how it wrestles with those pressures. The Pentagon’s references to the need to consult allies in the framework of its upcoming US global force posture review is thus a step in the right direction. However, the broader structural trends
that the Pentagon’s 2020 plan intended to address—the changing requirements of deterrence, the strategic downgrading of Europe, and the broader shift from mass to agility—are unlikely to go away, and they will undoubtedly inform the Biden administration’s wrestling with US force posture in Europe. At any rate, the growing embrace of a rotational-centric concept for Europe—common to both the Obama and Trump administrations—poses major challenges going forward.

As noted, the Pentagon has championed the use of agile and more flexible deployments since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, existing large military facilities might simply offer big targets that may prove vulnerable in the opening stages of a conflict, not least as they could provide first-strike (pre-emptive) incentives for Russia. This vulnerability may be acute given how Moscow’s investments in precision-strike missile capabilities since the mid-2000s do call for US forces to be dispersed and protected in hardened sites. However, rotational deployments can undercut assurance if receiving allies like Poland or the Baltic states believe that they can be taken away too easily, especially as the United States accords greater importance to the Indo-Pacific.

How might the Biden administration more adequately assuage assurance concerns associated with rotational deployments? Small, dispersed, but permanent forces in Poland and the Baltic states could thread the needle by offering sufficient assurance that the United States has “skin in the game” while at the same time lacking the offensive capabilities that would justifiably worry Russia. These forces could invest in more modern ISR, missile and missile defense, and cyber capabilities in order to boost local denial capabilities and to create additional risk that Russia must accept if it decided to undertake aggression. European allies in the region would no doubt want more, but from Washington’s perspective, it cannot plug every single deterrence gap, and a little bit of doubt about US security guarantees may not be a bad thing. It could incentivize greater contributions from European partners to plug gaps in NATO’s posture and to pull their own weight toward enhancing alliance solidarity. The 2020 Pentagon concept certainly has its flaws, but so does the status quo force posture that the United States has in Europe. The opportunity is ripe for the Biden administration to improve upon it.

Notes


13. Conley and Hicks, “Pentagon Action to Withdraw from Germany Benefits Our Adversaries.”


16. Biden, Jr., “Why America Must Lead Again.”
17. Conley and Hicks, “Pentagon Action to Withdraw from Germany Benefits Our Adversaries.”
43. The Global Posture Review of United States Military.


55. Lanoszka and Hunzeker, *Conventional Deterrence and Landpower*.


