



Executive Summary



Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College

THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN LANDPOWER: DOES FORWARD PRESENCE STILL MATTER? THE CASE OF THE ARMY IN EUROPE

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For at least 50 years, many American politicians, scholars, analysts, and observers of European affairs have complained about perceived inequitable burden-sharing in the transatlantic alliance. If only the United States would withdraw its military forces from Europe, so they reasoned, then the European allies would pick up the slack and start paying more for their own defense. The decision to station U.S. forces in Europe during peacetime was in substance and style a major commitment to European defense, matched to a limited degree by parallel British forward-stationing on the continent, as well as West German rearmament, for example. By the Vietnam era, though, as American commitments in Southeast Asia grew significantly, in part at the expense of commitments in Europe, many in the United States became critical of Europe's perceived unwillingness to shoulder more of the defense burden in Europe. Since then, similar burden-sharing complaints have been lodged against America's closest allies, with most arguing that the United States ought to use the withdrawal of its forward-based forces as a political tool to compel greater defense spending on the part of European North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members.

In fact, since the end of the Cold War, the American military presence in Europe *has*

dramatically downsized, from a highpoint of over a quarter-million Soldiers down to roughly 42,000 today. Ironically though, European defense spending has actually fallen for the most part during the same period. Why? Leading political science theories such as institutionalism, neorealism, and collective goods theory all offer potential explanations. However, these are flawed tools, since the available data contradict the expectations of institutionalism, and since both neorealism and collective goods theory assume that the purpose of U.S. forces in Europe today is to act as a deterrent force against a conventional military adversary such as Russia.

In fact, the primary purpose of U.S. forces in Europe today is to build interoperability and military capability within and among America's most capable and most likely future coalition partners through security cooperation activities like exercises and training events. This shift in purpose means that U.S. force presence in Europe is no longer – if indeed it ever was – a useful tool in extracting greater commitment to increased defense spending on the part of America's European allies. Nonetheless, through security cooperation, America's forward-based military forces in Europe play a critical role today in shaping the capabilities of allied military forces. Given the necessity of capable, interoperable

coalition partners for the future security threats Washington most expects to encounter, the role of America's forward military presence in Europe remains as vital as it was at the dawn of the Cold War, but for different reasons. Unfortunately, continuing calls to withdraw even more U.S. forces from Europe threaten to undermine Washington's ability to develop and maintain capable, interoperable coalition partners.

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