



Pentagon Outlines Concept for the Relocation of U.S. Troops from Germany

Artur Kacprzyk

On 29 July, the U.S. defence department presented a concept for the reduction of the American military presence in Germany from around 36,000 to 24,000 troops. Almost half of the forces set to be withdrawn will be relocated within Europe and the rest returned to the U.S., while rotational deployments to Europe are to increase. The Pentagon has stated that these steps will bolster NATO and deterrence of Russia, although in fact they are largely the result of U.S. President Donald [Trump's June decision](#) to punish Germany for insufficient defence spending, and the concept is intended to minimise the negative effects of that announcement. Implementation of the plans in their entirety is, however, uncertain, given the time needed to fully develop and implement them and the possible change of U.S. administration after the November presidential election.

What are the main elements of the rebasing?

Out of some 12,000 troops set for withdrawal, around 5,600 are to be permanently rebased to other NATO countries, partly through consolidation with similar units. Belgium is to host, among other forces, the U.S. European Command, which will be co-located with the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (both are commanded by the same U.S. officer). A squadron of F-16 fighters will be relocated to Italy, where such U.S. aircraft are already stationed. Italy will also host a full airborne brigade, as two of its battalions will be rebased from Germany. Around 6,400 troops are to withdraw to the U.S., including a 4,500-strong mechanised brigade. Together with other U.S. forces, the unit—unclear if as a whole or in part—is then planned to rotate to the Black Sea region, and potentially also to Poland and the Baltic States. Rotations include deployment of troops without their families, which is to allow for more intense exercises and greater flexibility in terms of the places and scale of the deployments.

What are the reasons for the Pentagon's announcement?

Despite the Pentagon's assurances that the concept is based on a comprehensive review of forces in Europe and worldwide, Trump's decision not only accelerated this review but also had a decisive impact on many of its

outcomes, if not the majority of them. The reorganisation includes force reductions only in Germany, meaning that the U.S. will relinquish extensive infrastructure there while having to invest in additional facilities elsewhere. This might cost at least several ("single digits") billion dollars. It is also telling that the Pentagon has changed some of its recent decisions, such as the air defence battalion that had just been stationed in Germany but will now relocate to Belgium. The actual reason for withdrawal of the mechanised brigade to the U.S. is not clear. Rotations of forces from the U.S. are indeed in line with the concept of "dynamic force employment", although this brigade was modernised precisely for operations in Europe and had already rotated to the Eastern Flank from Germany.

Can the withdrawal decision be revised?

There is no specific schedule for the relocation, which confirms that the move is being prepared hastily. It is not likely that the rebasing will be finished before the U.S. elections, as Trump probably wants. The Pentagon will start moving forces in a matter of weeks, but it also noted that investments in infrastructure for units, troops, and their families will take years. Further development of the plans within the administration, engagement with Congress, and consultations with allies are necessary as well. In effect, if

PISM SPOTLIGHT

Joe Biden wins in November, the new administration may stop or change the implementation of the concept. From the beginning, Democrats have criticized Trump's drawdown in Germany as harmful to the U.S. and its allies. They have also proposed legislation that could impede the withdrawal, but it is uncertain whether Congress will adopt it in light of disagreements on the issue among Republicans.

What are the possible implications for NATO?

Due to the lack of clarity about the details of the relocation, it is difficult to assess its eventual impact on U.S. ability to support NATO. At the very least, the rebasing will entail disruptions in the readiness of affected American units and headquarters. The Pentagon's efforts to keep a significant part of forces in Europe and consult the plans with allies are good for the Alliance. It does not change the fact, however, that Trump's rhetoric weakens NATO cohesion and magnifies the concerns about the future of the Alliance in case of his re-election. Trump may then order a further reduction of the U.S. military presence in Europe, especially as Belgium and Italy spend on defence less than Germany, which he has harshly criticised (in 2019, these three countries spent an estimated 0.93%, 1.22%, and 1.36% of GDP, correspondingly; the NATO spending goal by 2024 is 2% of GDP). U.S. allies' role in sharing the costs of rebasing

and stationing of American forces may also arise as an issue in the implementation of the concept.

Is the U.S announcement related to the American military presence in Poland?

Some of the forces set for withdrawal from Germany to the U.S. may at a later point rotate to Poland. Separately, the Pentagon announced that Poland will host rotations of a forward element (some 200 troops) of the V Corps headquarters now being set up in the U.S. but responsible for operations in Europe. These measures are in addition to the 2019 deal on increasing the rotations to Poland by around 1,000 troops. Any new rotations will be dependent upon concluding negotiations on details of the previous arrangement's implementation, including burden-sharing. Not relocating forces from Germany to Poland on a permanent basis is most likely a result of the Pentagon's desire to use existing infrastructure and logistics in Belgium and Italy. It could have also been wary of raising additional controversy in NATO, as many allies regard permanent deployments on the Eastern Flank as risking an escalation of tensions with Russia. The Pentagon apparently also seeks to balance the scale of rotational ground presence across the whole Eastern Flank, including Romania and Bulgaria.