



Defender Europe 21: Importance of the Military Exercises for Defence and Deterrence in Europe

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During the Defender Europe 21 exercises, U.S. troops tested a new concept of multi-domain operations, which is to provide them with an operational advantage over Russia and China. Continuing exercises with NATO allies is one of the main ways of developing defence and deterrence capabilities in Europe in the long term. Given the likely cuts in U.S. defence spending, NATO should increase its common military budget and allocate some funds to regular, large-scale exercises with significant U.S. involvement.

The U.S.-led *Defender Europe 21* exercises and associated smaller manoeuvres *Swift Response*, *Fires Shock*, *Immediate Response*, and *Saber Guardian* were conducted in NATO countries between March and June this year. In total, 2,100 U.S. National Guard troops and 800 Army reservists were transferred to Europe, mainly using infrastructure in the southern part of the continent. During the exercises, which took place on around 30 training grounds in 12 Alliance countries, a large defence operation was simulated in the Black Sea region and the Balkans. Simultaneously, defence and deterrence was practiced in Northern Europe (Norway) and the Baltic Sea region (Germany, Poland, Estonia). Large NATO manoeuvres *Steadfast Defender* were coordinated for the first time with the *Defender Europe* exercises.

Development of the U.S. Potential to Fight a War with Russia. The strategic goal of *Defender Europe 21* was to demonstrate and exercise the ability to provide support to European allies in the event of a conflict on NATO's Eastern Flank. During the smaller exercises, a new concept called multi-domain operations (MDO) was tested, which, thanks to the coordination of activities in air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace, along with the use of advanced technologies (including artificial intelligence), should provide the U.S. land forces (supported by other types of armed services) an

advantage over the enemy. As part of MDO, U.S. troops and allies trained on long-range precision-strike capability from a distance of several hundred kilometres. The use of rocket artillery and other advanced systems is meant to defeat Russian anti-access/area denial systems (A2/AD), which may prevent allies from sending reinforcements to a threatened area.

Since adopting a new defence strategy in 2018, the U.S. has been adapting its military capabilities to the threats posed by Russia and China. The armed forces should be able to win a large-scale conflict with one rival while effectively deterring another. This requires a thorough transformation of the land forces, which for two decades has been focused on anti-insurgency activities as part of the Global War on Terror. Land forces are being adapted to conduct large-scale operations at the division and corps levels. They are also testing MDO concept, which is to be approved as a new doctrine in 2022. New specialised units will be responsible for its further development, implementation, and application during a crisis. The U.S. already has deployed elements of a brigade responsible for coordinating with allies in Europe, the Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB), and in autumn is to activate a unit responsible for MDO in Europe—the Multi Domain Task Force (MDTF). The ability to conduct large operations

of a new type is to be ensured by the command element of the U.S. Army's V Corps deployed in Poznań and a reactivated rocket artillery brigade in Germany. In the medium to long term, the land forces are to form into two Force Packages, apparently adapted to the threats both in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. One is to be ready in 2026-2028, and the other in 2029-2035.

The speed of the transformation of the U.S. land forces depends on the development of new technologies and investments in new types of weapons, but also on the intensity of exercises. In 2020, the U.S. Army Command in Europe and Africa (USAREUR-AF) launched a series of new *Defender Europe* exercises. The first manoeuvres trained the ability to send reinforcements to Europe and conduct a large-scale defence operation in the Baltic Sea region. In 2022, the *Defender* exercises will test the ability to respond to global threats. From 2023, a Pacific exercise will occur in odd years and a Europe exercise in even years. During the next *Defender Europe* exercises in 2024, the U.S. intends for the first time to form a division-size force on the Eastern Flank. At the same time, the U.S. Army is developing the ability to fight a major war involving division and corps-size units through the *Warfighter* manoeuvres in the continental United States. This year, divisions from the UK and France participated in the exercises for the first time.

Steadfast Defender 21—NATO Strengthens Collective Defence. These manoeuvres, which took place this year for the first time, were coordinated with the U.S. *Defender Europe 21* exercises. The main purpose of the exercises was to support the deployment of troops from the U.S. to Europe by sea and to deploy NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), the "spearhead", on the Eastern Flank. For the first time, the Alliance used two new commands—JFC Norfolk, responsible for the transfer of U.S. troops through the Atlantic to Europe, and JSEC in Ulm, Germany, responsible for the transfer of troops within Europe. The combat activities of NATO's multinational forces also focused on the Black Sea and the Balkans region.

The exercises signalled the next step in strengthening NATO's ability to conduct a major collective defence mission. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the allies have created new command structures, strengthened forces that could be used in a large-scale multinational operation, deployed small combat units to Poland and the Baltic states, and increased the scale and frequency of exercises. Next year, NATO is to approve a new strategy that should prepare the Alliance for a long-term military threat posed by Russia but also facilitate the coordination of policies towards China. [Among the proposals approved during the 14 June NATO summit](#) was the coordinated development of new technologies, which will be crucial to gain an operational advantage over rivals. The allies also announced the possibility of increasing the common budget

of the Alliance from 2023, which currently amounts to about €2.5 billion. This would allow, for example, financing exercises that will be necessary to develop the Alliance's defence and deterrence capabilities.

The Allies emphasised the transparency and defensive nature of the exercises. Although, according to the Vienna Document, their size did not require the invitation of foreign observers because the individual exercises did not exceed 9,300 soldiers, NATO and the U.S. were open to accepting them. Russia, however, chose not to send observers. Although Russia has accelerated the development of its offensive capabilities by creating on average 20 new military units every year since the annexation of Crimea, it stated that the exercises were destabilising and announced the deployment of 20 new military formations in the Western Military District by the end of 2021.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The U.S. plans in the long term to increase the potential of its land forces as necessary to participate in a large-scale conflict in the Indo-Pacific and Europe simultaneously. However, in the event of a conflict with China, the ability to defend and deter Europe will largely depend on the potential of European allies. Development of this capability will require costly and politically difficult investments in new types of weapons and the adaptation of multinational forces to operate on the level of divisions and corps. Therefore, the new strategy of the Alliance should clearly indicate that Russia is the main military threat to NATO and support the development of the necessary potential by European allies.

[Even small cuts in the U.S. defence budget](#) may impact the frequency and scale of exercises conducted with allies. Therefore, it is in the interest of NATO to increase the Alliance's common budget from 2023 and to allocate some funds for regular exercises with U.S. troops, including their deployment to Europe. The European allies should also increase their participation in the *Warfighter* exercises in the U.S. in order to accelerate the development of the joint ability to conduct large-scale, division- and corps-size operations.

Russia is likely to continue its intense disinformation activities against NATO. The goal continues to be to create a justification for the development of Russian offensive military potential and, at the same time, weaken the determination of NATO countries to strengthen collective defence mechanisms and support partners threatened by Russia. It is in Poland's interest to use the common NATO budget to finance some of the costs of stationing Alliance multinational combat units on the Eastern Flank. This would reduce the risk that a mixture of fiscal problems and Russian blackmail would induce some allies to reduce their involvement in defence and deterrence activities in the region.