

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

---

Volume 46  
Number 1 *Parameters Spring 2016*

Article 4

---

Spring 3-1-2016

## Balancing Priorities in America's European Strategy

Luis Simón

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

 Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), and the [National Security Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Luis Simón, "Balancing Priorities in America's European Strategy," *Parameters* 46, no. 1 (2016), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2820.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

## US LEADERSHIP AND NATO

# Balancing Priorities in America's European Strategy

---

Luis Simón

© 2016 Luis Simón

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines how regional and global priorities challenge America's evolving European strategy. The need to "re-assure" Eastern and Central European allies in the face of Russian assertiveness calls for greater US strategic engagement in Europe. Conversely, defense-budgetary pressures, the Asia "rebalance," and the willingness to avoid excessive escalation with Russia constitute ongoing limitations to a significant US military engagement in and around Europe. That is the essence of America's European dilemma—how to invest sufficient resources in Europe as to ensure credible deterrence while keeping enough military and diplomatic bandwidth to pursue other global geopolitical objectives

Russian revisionism compels the United States to up its game in Europe. However, current discussions about US strategy and force posture on that continent cannot be isolated from broader geopolitical considerations. After all, Washington remains intent on "rebalancing" its strategic focus towards the Asia-Pacific, and the "demand signal" for US military engagement in the Middle East is unlikely to recede any time soon. In an increasingly constrained resource environment, the United States must grapple with the ever-relevant question of how to prioritize different regions, competitors, and challenges—a question that often boils down to striking an appropriate balance between Europe, East Asia and the Middle East. Coming up with a satisfactory way to address that question is more complex than it already sounds, not least as there is an important degree of geopolitical crossover amongst those three vital regions.

During the Cold War, Washington understood the preservation of a balance of power in the Middle East was essential to ensuring the supply of oil for key allies in Europe and East Asia—and to the security and thriving of a US-led order in those vital regions. Today, the high dependence of China, Japan, and South Korea on Middle Eastern oil means US influence in the Middle East can constitute an important source of strategic leverage in the Asia-Pacific. In turn, Europe remains an important base of operations and source of diplomatic and operational support to America's initiatives in the Middle East. While US strategy in Europe will no doubt be largely driven by the evolving regional threat environment, it is nonetheless important to take heed of some of the ways in which global geopolitical considerations may affect or constrain America's strategic picture in Europe.

Luis Simón is a Research Professor at the Institute for European Studies (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), Director of the Brussels Office of the Royal Elcano Institute, and co-founder of the online magazine *European Geostategy*. He obtained his PhD at Royal Holloway (University of London) in 2010.

This article examines how regional and global priorities may intersect in the context of Washington's evolving European strategy. On the one hand, the need to "reassure" Eastern and Central European allies in light of Russian revisionism constitutes a strong pressure for greater US strategic engagement in Europe. On the other hand, that pressure has been tempered by defense-budgetary constraints, the commitment to rebalance to Asia and a willingness to avoid excessive escalation with Russia. So far, these competing pressures have coalesced around a strategy of "reassurance through readiness," through an improvement of United States and NATO rapid-reaction capabilities and an enhanced pattern of rotational deployments, training, and exercises in Central and Eastern Europe. This has allowed Washington to address the concerns of its "frontline" allies while avoiding devoting too many resources to the European theatre of operations.

Russia's impending military modernization and its improving military-strategic position in north-eastern and south-eastern Europe beg the question of whether a "readiness-only" approach is likely to create lasting security in Europe. This is a question that appears to be gaining traction in US and NATO circles. Indeed, as the Alliance approaches its July 2016 Summit in Warsaw, the narrative shift from "reassurance" to "deterrence" signals a progressive "hardening" of US policy in Europe, and the intent to go beyond readiness and to emphasize the need for more presence. A good example of that is President Obama's request to quadruple the funds for the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) in fiscal year 2017, which is aimed at supporting a more persistent US military presence in Central and Eastern Europe through larger and longer rotational deployments and infrastructure development to support the pre-positioning of equipment.

### **Putting Europe in Context**

Russia's decision to annex Ukraine's Crimean peninsula by force in March 2014 constituted a frontal and unequivocal challenge to the security of a rules-based international system in Europe, which many had taken for granted for so long. Signs of Moscow's geopolitical push westwards have become increasingly visible. Besides having waged an open war in Eastern Ukraine for the past two years, Russia is engaging in regular "snap" exercises aimed at intimidating the Baltic states; it has repeatedly violated the air and maritime spaces of several NATO and non-NATO countries; devoted increasing resources to the buildup of its nuclear arsenal; undertaken a sustained effort to agitate Russian minorities living in Europe; and is engaged in a broader disinformation campaign aimed at undermining European and transatlantic cohesion.<sup>1</sup>

The prospect of state-on-state conflict in Europe and the reality of mounting regional geopolitical competition has sparked a debate about the future of US grand strategy. Some experts warn Washington may have taken Europe for granted, arguing nearly two decades of wars in the broader Middle East have taken too heavy a toll on US military presence

---

1 For an excellent overview of Russian strategy in Eastern Europe, see Alexander Lanoszka, "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe," *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2016): 175-195. See also Franklin C. Miller, "Adjusting NATO's Nuclear Policies: A Five Step Program," *NATOSource*, Atlantic Council, March 23, 2016.

in the old continent.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, the so-called strategic rebalance to the Asia-Pacific could further compound US retrenchment in Europe, and lead to greater geopolitical instability on that continent. This is to be avoided. Russian revisionism poses a direct threat to the security of a number of US allies and partners in Eastern and Central Europe. Unless it is checked, it could undermine one of America's foremost geostrategic imperatives, the preservation of a Europe "whole, free and at peace."

Meanwhile, the threat posed by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and ongoing instability in the Middle East and North Africa underscore the value of European bases and diplomatic and operational support for US strategic objectives in those areas. Yet, defense-budgetary constraints and Washington's commitment to rebalance strategically towards the Asia-Pacific region seem to caution against too much involvement in either Europe or the Middle East. In this regard, some scholars argue current efforts to counter the Russian and ISIL threats should not lead Washington to take its eye off the ball that matters most, namely, ensuring China's geopolitical and strategic rise does not disrupt the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific, or beyond.<sup>3</sup>

Most US foreign and defense policy officials insist America can "walk and chew gum at the same time," and argue the Asia-Pacific rebalance should not come at the expense of US engagement in Europe, the Middle East or elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> However, and notwithstanding a very laudable public diplomacy commitment to address *all* threats and stand by *all* allies, there is a seeming need to establish geopolitical and strategic priorities. America cannot possibly give its *all* in *every theater* at any given time. Resources are scarce, and states are constantly faced with the need to establish priorities. This is perhaps particularly pressing at a time characterized by ongoing cuts in the US defense budget, and a concomitant increase in defense spending in China, Russia, and much of the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> If Europeans continue to disregard their own security responsibilities, it will likely affect Washington's cost-benefit analysis, and lead it to give other regions higher priorities.

The question of which threats (should) matter most to the United States at any given time is by no means a new one, and it is prone to trigger a wide variety of answers and perspectives. On September 10, 2014, barely a few days after NATO's fateful Summit in Wales, President Obama argued the greatest threats to the United States came from radical groups in the Middle East and North Africa—singling out ISIL.<sup>6</sup>

---

2 See, e.g., Julianne Smith and Jerry Hendrix, *Assured Resolve: Testing Possible Challenges to Baltic Security* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, April 2016); and John Deni, "Pivot to Europe," *The National Interest*, March 26, 2014.

3 See, e.g., Richard K. Betts, "Realism Is an Attitude, Not a Doctrine," *The National Interest* (September-October 2015); and Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (London: Cornell University Press, 2014).

4 Multiple interviews with US officials in Washington, DC and Brussels, November 2015-April 2016.

5 For a comparative analysis, see *The Military Balance 2016* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016), 19-26. Ever since the *2011 Budget Control Act* (BCA) set automatic cuts in all areas of federal spending, the US defense budget has suffered deep and systematic reductions. So far "sequestration" has amounted to nearly \$100 billion cuts in the US defense budget, from nearly \$740 billion in FY2011 to about \$649 billion in FY2015. For a recent overview of the impact of sequestration upon the US defense budget, see Todd Harrison, *Analysis of the FY2015 Defense Budget* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2014).

6 The White House, Statement by the President on ISIL, September 10, 2014.

Barely a year later, during his Senate Confirmation hearing, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford identified Russia as the “greatest threat” to US national security.<sup>7</sup> These two statements contrast with the Pentagon’s 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, which pointed to the Asia-Pacific as the main area of strategic priority for America over the long-term.<sup>8</sup>

For a global power like the United States, any discussion on which threats or theaters matter most opens up an equally relevant question: what kind of implications do US policies in one region have upon its interests and strategic position in other regions? Beyond the simpler problem of limited resources, strategic prioritization can have wider geopolitical and diplomatic ramifications. According to Michael Roskin, the United States simply cannot afford to treat both China and Russia as competitors; it should “pick the bigger long term threat” and “treat it firmly,” and it should treat the lesser evil “flexibly.” Statements like this evoke a perennial problem in international relations: to what extent must state A accommodate the demands of state B on a given issue or region in exchange for cooperation or concessions from state B on other issues or regions?<sup>9</sup> President Obama himself recently argued Ukraine is not a “core” American interest and it matters more to Moscow than it does to Washington.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, prominent scholars like Graham Allison or Henry Kissinger have warned humiliating Moscow over Ukraine could undermine the prospect of cooperation on issues more important to the United States, such as strategic arms reduction, countering global nuclear proliferation, and bringing stability to the Middle East.<sup>12</sup>

### **Russia as a Partner? Think Again**

Despite current events in Ukraine, arguments that Russia could play a constructive role in areas in which America has important interests have gained traction in US government circles and beyond. Policymakers and analysts focused on getting through the crisis of the day often portray Russia as a potential partner in the Middle East. Thus, Secretary of State John Kerry has repeatedly alluded to Moscow’s constructive role during the Iran nuclear deal, arguably the main foreign policy legacy of the Obama administration.<sup>13</sup> On a similar note, Kerry has also argued any viable peace process in Syria will require close cooperation between Russia and the United States.<sup>14</sup> In turn, those with their eye on future challenges often like to imagine Russia as a countervailing force against

---

7 “Russia is greatest threat to the US, says Joint Chiefs chairman nominee Gen. Joseph Dunford,” *The Washington Post*, July 9, 2015.

8 US Department of Defense, “Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense,” January 2012.

9 Michael G. Roskin, “The New Cold War,” *Parameters* 44, No. 1 (Spring 2014): 5-9.

10 For a good discussion of this problem see Ernst B. Haas, “Why Collaborate? Issue-Linkage and International Regimes,” *World Politics* 32, No. 3 (1980): 357-405.

11 “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic’s Exclusive Report on the US President’s Hardest Foreign Policy Decisions*, *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2016.

12 Graham Allison, “US-Russia Relations: What Would Kissinger Do?” *The National Interest*, September 28, 2015; and Henry A. Kissinger, “Kissinger’s Vision for US-Russia Relations,” *The National Interest*, February 4, 2016.

13 US Department of State, “John Kerry Interview with PBS’s Charlie Rose,” New York City, April 5, 2016.

14 *Ibid.*

China's expansion in Central and East Asia, or even in the Arctic.<sup>15</sup> Richard Betts has summarized this line of thinking rather eloquently:

The rise of China is ultimately a more serious security challenge than Russian reassertion, and a united front of those two adversaries would weaken the West. In the 1970s, realists welcomed American rapprochement with Mao Zedong's China because it weakened the more formidable adversary, the Soviet Union. Today, the relative power positions of Russia and China are reversed, so realists should hope for a way to achieve a US rapprochement with Russia.<sup>16</sup>

The idea of a US-Russia rapprochement can be contested on several grounds. Perhaps most evidently, the very notion of a US-Russian rapprochement plays right into Putin's expectation that cooperation over Syria or the Middle East can lead to an accommodation to Russian priorities in Ukraine, or elsewhere in Eastern Europe.<sup>17</sup> One cannot help but wonder what that slippery slope of "big picture" geopolitical quid pro quo can mean for US strategy in Europe, let alone the security of US allies and partners. American officials often try to pre-empt any such discussion by pointing out Washington is not in the business of sacrificing its European allies and interests for the sake of vague and uncertain musings about "global cooperation" with a characteristically untrustworthy regime.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Washington has repeatedly turned down Moscow's proposals for a high-level NATO-Russia political dialogue centered on Syria. In this vein, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has insisted any dialogue between the Alliance and Russia should focus primarily on the crisis in and around Ukraine and the need to implement the Minsk peace agreements.<sup>19</sup>

The security of US allies and interests in Europe is not the only thing standing in the way of a Russo-American geopolitical rapprochement. A number of officials and experts have actually challenged the very premise that the US and Russia have shared interests beyond Europe, arguing that Russian actions in the Middle East and Asia are in fact threatening US allies and interests in those regions. According to former Supreme Allied Commander of US Forces in Europe General Philip Breedlove, "Russia's military intervention in Syria has bolstered the regime of Bashar al-Assad, targeted US-supported opposition elements, and complicated US and Coalition operations against ISIL."<sup>20</sup> The ongoing crisis in Syria, Breedlove contends, is "destabilizing the entire region, and Russia's military intervention changed the dynamics of the conflict, which may lead to new or greater threats to the US and its Allies for years to come."<sup>21</sup> In this line, Baev has argued one of the main motivations for Russia in the Middle East is to thwart US policy objectives in the region.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Julie Smith and Jerry Hendrix accuse Russia

---

15 Roskin, "The New Cold War."

16 Betts, "Realism Is an Attitude, Not a Doctrine."

17 See, e.g., Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The Russian Connection Between Syria and Ukraine," *The National Interest*, February 17, 2016.

18 Multiple interviews with US officials in Washington, DC and Brussels, November 2015-April 2016.

19 Statement by the Secretary General on NATO-Russia Council meeting, April 8, 2016.

20 General Philip Breedlove, *US European Command Posture Statement 2016*, February 25, 2016.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Pavel K. Baev, "Russia as Opportunist or Spoiler in the Middle East," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 2 (2015): 8-21.



of “weaponizing migration,” and argue, by helping Bashar al-Assad’s regime regain territory, Moscow is “deliberately flooding Europe with refugees with the hope that it will break European resolve.”<sup>23</sup>

Not everyone buys the idea there is some high-order geopolitical logic that compels the Washington and Moscow to work together to prevent the rise of China from upsetting the balance of power in Asia. The fact that the Sino-Russian relationship includes a good dose of mutual suspicion is no secret, but the jury is still out on whether the United States can exploit that for its own benefit and on its own terms. Beijing and Moscow would be foolish not to understand that turning on each other openly on a continental front would significantly reduce their strategic position and diplomatic leverage vis-à-vis Washington in those regions closest to their hearts, East Asia and Eastern Europe respectively. Rather than hope for the best and wait for Russia and China to turn on each other, Washington should probably plan for the worst and expect these two countries to endure real sacrifices to keep their bilateral relationship afloat.

The notion the United States will be the only actor able to play all sides in the Sino-Russian-American triangle is both naïve and dangerous. Moscow and Beijing have so far managed to keep their Central Asia issues from escalating. To be sure, the steady increase of Chinese trade and investment in Central Asia does represent a challenge to Russia’s long-term influence in the region—and Beijing’s vision of a pan-Eurasian trade and communications corridor may clash with Russia’s attempts to shut Europe out of Central Asian energy and trade. However, last year’s agreement between President Putin and General Secretary Xi to coordinate China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union in Central Asia goes on to show the two countries are committed to working out their differences.<sup>24</sup>

Insofar as East Asia goes, the transfer of Russian weaponry and technology has proven to be an important asset for China’s military modernization, a process that could very well challenge US hegemony in the Western Pacific and upset the regional strategic balance.<sup>25</sup> Russia might not be giving China all it needs and at the time it needs it, and the weaponry and technology flow is likely to slow even more as China powers up. However, this is not an issue about which the United States should be complacent. Russia’s plans to deliver the long-range S-400 surface-to-air missile system to China is likely to represent a significant boost to Beijing’s Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities, aimed precisely at constraining the deployment of US forces into the Asia-Pacific, and reducing their freedom of maneuver once in that theater.<sup>26</sup>

23 Smith and Hendrix, *Assured Resolve*, 2.

24 Tao Wang and Rachel Yampolsky, “Will China and Russia’s Partnership in Central Asia Last?” *The Diplomat*, September 21, 2015.

25 See, e.g., Tai Ming Cheung, “The Chinese Defense Economy’s Long March from Imitation to Innovation,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 2 (2011): 325-354.

26 See, e.g., Michelle Sevin-Coetzee and Axel Hellman, “How Russia Made America Pivot Back to Asia,” *The National Interest*, December 23, 2015. For a comprehensive overview of America’s A2/AD challenge in the Asia-Pacific, see Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: Norton, 2011).

It could be argued the main reason Russia behaves as a spoiler in the Middle East or East Asia is to leverage the United States into concessions in Eastern Europe. However, betting on the idea that rewarding a spoiler attitude would lead Russia to reverse course rather than double down on blackmail appears to be a risky proposition.

Arguably, Moscow's ongoing aggression in Eastern Ukraine and intimidation of US allies in Europe represents too significant a roadblock to the notion of US-Russia rapprochement. As Asia becomes an increasingly important referent in US global strategy, there is indeed a possibility Washington may eventually feel the temptation to look at Russia through a "what-can-you-do-for-me-in-Asia" lens. The more Europeans disregard their own security responsibilities and the heavier Washington's Eastern European burden becomes, the more likely it is such a feeling might turn into actionable policy.<sup>27</sup> In any event, with defense dollars running low and global geostrategic competition running high, discussions on geopolitical trade-offs across regions are as lively as ever in the realm of US grand strategy. These wider geopolitical dilemmas often translate into competing pressures at the military-strategic level, the nuts and bolts of US force posture and defense strategy in Europe.

### Getting Europe "Right"

Since the annexation of Crimea, most discussions about US strategy in Europe have revolved around determining an appropriate response to Russian revisionism. The threat posed by Russia is often portrayed as a "hybrid" one, in that Moscow resorts to a wide variety of military and non-military ways and means to weaken the resolve of NATO and non-NATO countries in Eastern Europe (and beyond), and to expand its own geopolitical clout westwards.<sup>28</sup> These methods include the leveraging of Russian ethnic minorities abroad; the use of special operations forces for destabilization purposes; the threat of cutting off gas supplies to Eastern and Central European countries (most of whom are almost completely dependent on imports from Russia); financial, political and cyber penetration across Europe; a sustained disinformation campaign aimed at fostering division and undermining intra-European and intra-Alliance cohesion; and so on.

Military force is a central component of Russian hybrid-warfare.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the very purpose of hybrid warfare is to ensure all the military and non-military instruments of state power work in synchronization—a principle as old as statehood itself. Russia's preservation of "local escalation dominance" (in the Baltics and Ukraine) is critical to cementing the narrative that certain NATO member states (most notably the Baltics) are "undefensible," and it would be prohibitively costly for the Alliance to try to retake them after a Russian seizure. This sort of narrative is aimed at undermining the credibility of NATO security guarantees in

27 See, e.g., Luis Simón, "Europe, The Rise of Asia and the Future of the Transatlantic Relationship," *International Affairs* 91, no. 5 (2015): 269-289.

28 Lanoszka, "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe." See also Dave Johnson, *Russia's Approach to Conflict – Implications for NATO's Defense and Deterrence*, NATO Defense College Research Paper No. 111 (Roma, Italy: NATO Defense College, April 2015).

29 Andrew Monaghan, "The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare,'" *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2015-16): 65-74.



front-line member states, and could strengthen the voices of stakeholders who favor political accommodation of Russia. That, in turn, could “soften” resistance in front-line countries and make them more vulnerable to other (more subtle) means of penetration.

Discussions on how the United States should respond to Russian revisionism oscillate between focusing on the more subtle aspects of hybrid warfare (such as disinformation, cyber threats, energy blackmail, etc.) and on the fact that Moscow’s military modernization could soon upset the strategic balance in parts of Eastern Europe. In modulating its response, America must take heed of both the evolving threat environment in the east as well as a wide variety of strategic and political sensitivities within NATO.

While certainly concerned about all forms of Russian penetration, most Eastern and Central European allies worry “hybrid-hype” could lead the Alliance to get “hypnotized by complexity,” and overlook Russia’s improving conventional military capabilities and capacities.<sup>30</sup> These countries welcome economic sanctions against Russia as well as efforts aimed at diversifying Europe’s energy supply-base, increasing its cyber-resilience, and countering Russian disinformation; but for them security comes ultimately in the form of a permanent NATO (read US) military presence on their territories.

In contrast, most Western European allies worry about escalating tensions with Russia beyond a point of no return. These countries are often happy to portray Russia as a problem that has to be dealt with mainly through economic sanctions and diplomacy. This is not to say Western Europeans deny the existence of a security threat to their Eastern and Central European allies, as indeed illustrated by their commitment to NATO-wide reassurance initiatives in the East. However, caution and de-escalation feature rather prominently in Western European minds. In this regard, most Western European countries (and most notably Germany) insist on the need to respect the spirit of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, whereby the Alliance committed to “carry out its collective defense and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement *rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.*”<sup>31</sup>

In addition to addressing a wide variety of sensitivities within the Alliance, when crafting an appropriate response to Russian revisionism the United States must also calibrate how that response fits in with its other global priorities and overall global strategy. Russia’s attempts to expand its geopolitical influence westwards do indeed pose a direct and serious threat to US regional allies and interests—and that surely calls for greater American strategic engagement in Eastern Europe. However, excessive escalation could undermine US interests in at least two ways:

---

30 This is in no way an exhaustive division. Some Eastern European allies like Bulgaria, Greece or Cyprus are much less worried about Russia than others, e.g., the Baltic States or Romania. In turn, some Western Europeans (like the United Kingdom) are much more engaged than others in NATO activities in the Eastern flank. Notwithstanding these exceptions and nuances, Eastern Europeans are generally more concerned than Western Europeans about the Russian threat. Central Europe is harder to fit into a general category, with Poland constituting a clear example of a country focused on the Russian threat, Hungary and the Czech Republic on the other end of the spectrum, and Germany somewhere in between.

31 NATO, *Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation*, signed in Paris, France, May 27, 1997.

(1) by tying down too many resources to the European theatre and (2) by leading Russia to push back harder against American interests in other regions, such as the Middle East or even Asia.

*Reassurance Through Readiness: A Politico-Strategic Compromise?*

In trying to reconcile multiple political sensitivities within the Alliance and competing strategic pressures (Europe vs. global), the United States seems to have opted for a strategy that revolves around reassuring its Eastern and Central European allies (and partners) through increased readiness, and emphasized the need for more rotational deployments, exercises, training and capacity building in Eastern Europe. The vision of “reassurance through readiness” permeates through President Obama’s June 2014 European Reassurance Initiative—an Overseas Contingency Operations budgetary line aimed at supporting an increase in US exercises, training, and rotational presence in Central and Eastern Europe; supporting more persistent US naval deployments to the Baltic, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean; building the defense capacities of frontline allies and partners (especially Ukraine and Georgia); and exploring infrastructure development to support the pre-positioning of equipment.<sup>32</sup> This same vision has also informed NATO policy, as perhaps best illustrated by the decisions adopted by Allied leaders at their September 2014 Summit in Wales. At the Wales Summit, NATO unveiled its so-called Readiness Action Plan (RAP), an initiative that revolves around a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) capable of deploying to the frontline at short notice by drawing on the existence of reception facilities, logistics, equipment and an appropriate Command and Control infrastructure in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>33</sup>

The reassurance through readiness vision is indeed very much compatible with a US force posture paradigm that revolves around a light footprint approach to European security, and an emphasis on engagement (i.e. through training, exercises, rotational deployments or high-tech initiatives in areas like cyber-security or Ballistic Missile Defense) as opposed to a permanent and “heavy” US military presence on the continent.<sup>34</sup> However imperfect, reassurance through readiness seems to somehow tick every (US) box. For one thing, the continuous and increased flow of US force rotations into the Baltics, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria allows America to reassure frontline allies by claiming its military presence in Eastern Europe is permanent in all but name.<sup>35</sup> For another, the lack of a permanent presence *strictu sensu* respects the letter of the NATO-Russia founding act, which continues to constitute a “red line” for many Western European allies. It also helps substantiate Washington’s claims that its military measures are defensive in nature, as indeed illustrated by the absence of deep-strike weapons

---

32 The White House, “European Reassurance Initiative and Other US Efforts in Support of NATO Allies and Partners,” June 3, 2014.

33 See, e.g., John Deni, “NATO’s New Trajectories After the Wales Summit,” *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (Autumn 2014): 57-65. On how EU-NATO cooperation on defense infrastructure development can improve readiness, see Daniel Fiott, “Modernising NATO’s Defence Infrastructure with EU funds,” *Survival* 58, no. 2 (2016): 77-94.

34 Luis Simón, “Understanding US Retrenchment in Europe,” *Survival* 57, no. 2 (2015): 157-172.

35 Multiple interviews with US and NATO officials in Washington DC and Brussels, November 2015-April 2016.

that could attack the Russian homeland.<sup>36</sup> This, in turn, fits the broader geostrategic purpose of avoiding an unnecessary escalation with Russia, which could tie down excessive resources and undermine US interests beyond Europe.

### *The Evolving Military-Strategic Imbalance and the Limits of Reassurance Through Readiness*

For all its possible virtues, Washington's light footprint approach and vision of reassurance through readiness might not be suitable for the evolving strategic reality in Eastern Europe. In fact, US military officers and NATO officials have begun to question the wisdom of a readiness-only approach given the speed of Russian military modernization.<sup>37</sup> In particular, the deployment of precision-guided anti-ship, anti-aircraft, land-attack, anti-satellite cruise and ballistic missiles in advanced locations in northeastern and southeastern Europe (such as Kaliningrad and Sevastopol respectively) presents NATO with an anti-access and area denial challenge.<sup>38</sup> These capabilities threaten to constrain the deployment of opposing forces into Eastern Europe, and reduce their freedom of maneuver once in that theater.

Russia's A2/AD capabilities pose a very concrete operational problem for NATO. Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow has warned that, in the case of a conflict or crisis, any allied aircraft and vessels that head into the frontline states are highly vulnerable to Russian surface-to-air, anti-ship, and land-attack missiles.<sup>39</sup> Against this backdrop, a more permanent, larger and heavier (US) military presence in Eastern Europe may well be the only way to offset Russia's A2/AD challenge and restore deterrence. In this regard, a recent RAND report estimates at least seven brigades (including three heavy armored ones adequately supported by airpower, land-based fires, and other enablers on the ground) are needed to deter a potential Russian attack on the Baltics.<sup>40</sup> This could constitute the foundation of a strategy of "deterrence by denial," which would require greater efforts in key areas such as theater air and missile defense, antitank weapons, anti-infantry rockets, pre-target artillery, "flooding and channelling," land mines, as well as the development of standing irregular forces that can make the frontline states indigestible to Russia, and thus raise the costs of an invasion.<sup>41</sup>

As the Alliance approaches its July 2016 Summit in Warsaw, the narrative shift from "reassurance" to "deterrence" suggests a "hardening" of US and NATO policy.<sup>42</sup> President Obama's request to quadruple funding for ERI for Fiscal Year (FY) 2017, from \$789 million in FY

36 Lisa Sawyer Samp and Mark F. Cancian, "The European Reassurance Initiative," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 12, 2016.

37 See, e.g., Breedlove, *US European Command Posture Statement 2016*.

38 See Luis Simón, "The 'Third' US Offset Strategy and Europe's 'Anti-Access' Challenge," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2016), early view; and Stephan Frühling and Guillaume Lasconjarias, "NATO, A2/AD and the Kaliningrad Challenge," *Survival* 58, no. 2 (2016): 95-116.

39 Alexander Vershbow, "NATO Needs Strategy to Address Threats from the South and the East," *New Eastern Europe*, Issue 6 (XIV), November 8, 2015.

40 See David A. Schlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016).

41 See A. Wess Mitchell, "A Bold New Baltic Strategy for NATO," *The National Interest*, January 6, 2016.

42 Multiple interviews with US and NATO officials in Washington, DC and Brussels, November 2015-April 2016.

2016 to \$3.4 billion, constitutes a telling sign in this regard. The request represents a significant reinvestment in America's military presence in Europe. Critically, additional funds will serve to add an armoured brigade combat team (BCT) on permanent rotation and expand prepositioned sets of war-fighting equipment (known as Army Prepositioned Stock) in Central and Eastern Europe, thus further blurring the line between "continuous" and "permanent" presence.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusions

This article has explored how regional and global priorities intersect in the context of America's evolving European strategy. In light of Russia's revisionism and improving military position in Eastern Europe, considerations related to the evolution of the regional threat environment will undoubtedly drive discussions on US strategy in Europe. However, any such discussions must also take heed of broader geostrategic and political considerations.

Competing geopolitical and military-strategic priorities are intertwined in a number of ways. For one thing, defense-budgetary pressures, the "Asian rebalance," and the objective to "de-escalate" tensions with Russia would seem to suggest an austere US military footprint in and around Europe. Conversely, the need to "reassure" Eastern and Central European allies in light of Russian revisionism calls for greater US strategic engagement in Europe. The ideal synthesis appears to be a strategy of reassurance through readiness. That would allow the United States to continue pursuing a low-cost, light and small footprint approach to European security, and avoid devoting excessive resources, which may otherwise undermine broader geostrategic objectives, such as the Asia rebalance.

However, it is not clear to what extent that is possible in the light of Russia's improving military strategic position in northeastern and southeastern Europe. While devoting excessive resources is to be avoided, a "stingy" US approach to Europe could invite further Russian aggression and undermine the security of key regional allies and interests, which could, in turn, demand greater US attention and resources in the future. This appears to be the heart of America's European dilemma: how to invest enough so as to ensure credible deterrence while keeping enough military and diplomatic bandwidth to pursue other global geopolitical objectives. To this problem, we could add the "moral hazard" of encouraging allies to free-ride on this dilemma.

A fashionable way to try to square America's European circle is to suggest European allies should step up their games. In recent years, allied and partner capacity building have become mantras in US strategic jargon.<sup>44</sup> Some may think America's dream scenario would be to establish some sort of senior-junior division of labor, whereby Europeans would do the "manning" of the eastern flank and the United States would confine itself to "strategic cover" (by way of nuclear deterrence, missile, and cyber defense) and enabling functions, i.e. through the provision of ISR and Command and Control. Similar ideas have been floated around

---

43 Samp and Mark F. Cancian, "The European Reassurance Initiative."

44 Ibid.

in a Middle East context, where US allies are supposed to do the bulk of the fighting in Syria and Iraq, and the United States can supposedly confine its role to support and mentoring, while concentrating on the more strategic “stuff,” such as missile defense and nuclear deterrence in the Persian Gulf.<sup>45</sup>

This sort of senior-junior type division of labor in Europe would indeed tick the box of “maximum influence under minimum presence.” However, it is unclear whether the European allies can deliver deterrence at the conventional level without substantial US engagement. This is indeed the sequel to the European contributions vs. US commitment debate, which goes back to the Cold War. The main difference is many of the allies in eastern and central Europe are not nearly as advanced economically and technologically as Western Europeans were during the Cold War—and this means, from a US perspective, the trade-off looks distinctly worse than during the Cold War.<sup>46</sup>

As already argued, most of the European allies situated alongside or nearby NATO’s Eastern flank (namely, the Baltics, Poland and Romania) consider a permanent US military presence on their soil their ultimate security guarantee. As Michael Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka point out, forwardly deployed US soldiers and marines signal Washington has “skin in the game,” and are critical to the credibility of US security guarantees.<sup>47</sup> Contrary to conventional wisdom, those troops are wanted not because they can die (and can therefore trigger a US reaction) but because they can kill—punish, compel, and ultimately defeat an under-terred adversary.

Both military-strategic expediency and intra-alliance cohesion call for a broadly based US military engagement in and around Europe, one that goes beyond “strategic cover” and enabling functions and includes a forward permanent presence of American land, air, maritime and amphibious assets in Central and Eastern Europe. Judging by Obama’s request to quadruple the funds for the European Reassurance Initiative in FY2017, it appears this point is increasingly recognized in Washington. However, a constrained budgetary environment and the Pentagon’s commitment to the rebalance to Asia do call for strategic prioritization—and are likely to remain countervailing forces to a greater US engagement in Europe for years to come. In this regard, Washington will likely continue to pressure its regional allies and partners to do more (increase defense spending) and do better (concentrate on tasks and capabilities where they can add value). In this regard, getting the Western European allies to step up their contributions to the security of the eastern flank is likely to remain an important US political and strategic priority over the coming years.

---

45 For a comprehensive overview of this debate, see Cordesman. For a critique, see David E. Johnson, “Fighting the “Islamic State:” The Case for US Ground Troops,” *Parameters*, 45, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 7-17.

46 I thank Alexander Mattelaer for this insightful observation.

47 Michael Allen Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, “Landpower and American Credibility,” *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2015-16): 17-26.