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# US LEADERSHIP AND NATO

## Modifying America's Forward Presence in Eastern Europe

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John R. Deni

**ABSTRACT:** Starting in 2017, Washington plans to begin heel-to-toe rotations of an armored brigade from the United States to Eastern Europe. In some respects, this represents a significant improvement over the assurance and deterrence steps taken by the United States and several of its NATO allies over the last two years. Although the administration's plan is indeed a step in the right direction, it falls short of the hype ascribed by the media, not to mention Moscow. More broadly, the US approach to reassurance and deterrence still suffers from some strategic shortcomings.

Starting in 2017, Washington plans to begin “heel-to-toe” rotations of an armored brigade combat team from the United States to Eastern Europe, assuming the US Congress agrees to President Obama’s funding request. This decision represents a significant improvement over the assurance and deterrence steps taken by the United States and several of its NATO allies over the last two years.

The measures to date have included short-term rotational deployments of forces from North America and/or Western Europe for limited-duration exercises and other training events in Eastern Europe. From both temporal and qualitative perspectives such deployments leave much to be desired. For example, they lack the constancy of heel-to-toe rotations, essentially creating gaps of weeks or months, which Russia could exploit to achieve a *fait accompli*. Additionally, the deployments to date have not always include armored units, which puts alliance defenses at a disadvantage relative to Russian military power in the region. Deploying an armored brigade combat team on a rotational basis starting in early 2017 will directly address these shortcomings.

More broadly, the expanded European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) program signals a renewed American commitment to and leadership of the alliance. This is especially important at a time when Europeans have questioned whether and how their continent figures into Washington’s strategic priorities. As the United States deepens its involvement in Iraq and the fight against ISIL, continues to consolidate stability in Afghanistan, and rebalances to the Asia-Pacific region, European allies may have some reason to think Washington’s attention is focused elsewhere. The expansion of the ERI program—especially as seen through the media fanfare that greeted its announcement—should provide solace to those concerned about US leadership in NATO.

Despite these and other strengths of the ERI expansion though, the program and its centerpiece—a rotationally deployed armored

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brigade—have several shortcomings. Although the ERI expansion is a step in the right direction, it appears unlikely to effectively or thoroughly address the security challenges confronting vital American interests in Europe. This article will address how and why that is the case, and what might be done to augment the ERI expansion. Ultimately, these steps could help to strengthen the broader US response to Russia's upending of the European security environment with its invasion and dismembering of Ukraine.

### Rotational Deployments to Date

American forward-based military strength in Europe has dwindled dramatically in recent decades, both quantitatively and qualitatively. From roughly 122,000 soldiers in 1992, the US Army has seen its forward-based presence in Europe steadily decline to roughly 30,000 soldiers today. The largest American forward-based combat arms formations in Europe today include a Stryker cavalry regiment of roughly 5,000 troops and an airborne brigade of about 3,800 troops.

Qualitatively, US force structure in Europe has also been decimated by cuts over the last 20 years. The only remaining US combat aviation brigade in Europe has been reduced significantly in the last two years (ironically, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine) to a single attack battalion, about a dozen heavy-lift CH-47 Chinook helicopters, ten general support UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters, and a medical evacuation unit. Moreover, key enablers have been stripped from the forward-based US force structure in Europe, like artillery, cyber warfare, and electronic warfare capabilities. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the lack of US heavy mechanized formations represents a major challenge, especially in light of recent Russian investments in armor.<sup>1</sup>

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its invasion of Ukraine's Donbas region exposed the shortsightedness of the force structure cuts, again from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. In an effort to make best use of the remaining American force structure in Europe to reassure allies and deter Russian aggression in northeastern Europe, the United States deployed four companies from the Italy-based 173rd airborne brigade, one each to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland in April 2014. These units participated in exercises and other training events throughout the spring and summer of that year, and were a physical manifestation of the American commitment to allied solidarity.

That same summer in 2014, the Pentagon announced the European Reassurance Initiative, a nearly \$1 billion program to support rotational troop deployments from the United States, as well as other reassurance and deterrence measures.<sup>2</sup> Shortly thereafter—in October 2014—the Italy-based companies were replaced with companies from the 1st brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division, based in Texas. This temporary rotational deployment lasted roughly two months and included armored equipment such as Abrams tanks and Bradley infantry fighting vehicles,

1 Charles K. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right," *Military Review* 96, no. 1 (January-February 2016): 36-37. For example, Moscow has dedicated a significant amount of development and procurement resources toward the innovative T-14 Armata tank.

2 The ERI has supported reassurance and deterrence efforts on the part of all services, including expansion of the US Air Force's aviation detachment in Poland, US Navy deployments in the Black Sea, and expanded efforts on part of the US Marine Corps' Black Sea Rotational Force.

thereby addressing some of the capability gaps in the US force structure in Europe.

Following the winter holiday break, the Germany-based US 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment deployed one company to each of the same four countries for roughly two and a half months. Thereafter, the United States followed a similar pattern for the remainder of 2015 and through 2016, exchanging CONUS-based companies and Europe-based companies to achieve a nearly continuous presence in northeastern Europe. These deployments were warmly welcomed by the receiving countries and, in conjunction with other US and allied reassurance measures, contributed to strengthening NATO's deterrent posture.

Nevertheless, some of the most nervous allies in Eastern Europe expressed concern that the steps taken by the United States and other allies were necessary but insufficient. Some allied governments argued rather vocally and publicly for a far more robust NATO response, one that would include *permanent* deployment of troops.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Poland's leaders characterized the alliance's unwillingness to do so as evidence that Poland and other allies in Central and Eastern Europe were being relegated to some sort of "buffer state" status.<sup>4</sup>

Assessments that are somewhat more objective, such as those available through war games and other analyses, have pointed to similar conclusions regarding the insufficiency of allied responses in northeastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, given the limited force posture of the alliance in northeastern Europe, NATO would find it difficult to defend or retake Baltic state territory in the face of any large-scale, determined Russian invasion.

Simultaneously, there appears to have been a growing sense within the US Department of Defense that the United States and its allies needed to think more strategically about the way forward, beyond the measures taken in 2014 immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. More specifically, the administration evidently saw the need for "a fundamental change" in its approach, from merely assurance to an equally strong emphasis on deterrence.<sup>6</sup>

For all of these reasons, the Obama administration proposed a dramatic increase in ERI funding in its 2017 budget proposal. Sent to Congress in February, the proposal increases funding from roughly \$789 million in fiscal year 2016 to just over \$3.4 billion for fiscal year 2017. Much of this more than four-fold increase in funding will be used to pay for the rotational deployment of an armored brigade combat team to Central and Eastern Europe, plus the prepositioning of enough US equipment for a so-called "fires" brigade (consisting of artillery, rockets, and so forth), a sustainment brigade, a division headquarters, and other

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3 Kjetil Malkenes Hovland, "Estonian President Calls for Permanent NATO Base in Country," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2014.

4 Henry Foy, "NATO Treats Poland Like a Buffer State, Says New President," *The Financial Times*, August 13, 2015.

5 Julia Ioffe, "The Pentagon Is Preparing New War Plans for a Baltic Battle Against Russia," *Foreign Policy*, September 18, 2015.

6 Email exchange with a civilian staff member at US Army Europe Headquarters in Wiesbaden, Germany, February 19, 2016. See also, Philip Breedlove, "US European Command Posture Statement 2016," February 25, 2016, [www.eucom.mil/media-library/article/35164/u-s-european-command-posture-statement-2016](http://www.eucom.mil/media-library/article/35164/u-s-european-command-posture-statement-2016).

enabling units. In sum, if the proposal is fully funded, the United States would have nearly a division's worth of capability in Europe for the first time in many years.

### Beefing Up?

Media accounts have somewhat breathlessly claimed the United States is “fortifying,” “beefing up,” and “significantly” increasing its military presence in Eastern Europe.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, adding a rotationally deployed armored brigade of 4,200 troops represents a major increase in the number of US soldiers on the ground in Europe at any given moment, at least in terms of percentage. The addition of a rotationally deployed heavy brigade is roughly a 50 percent increase in the number of combat soldiers in Europe.

Moreover, the rotationally deployed brigade brings with it capabilities that are not currently organic to the US brigades permanently forward-based in Europe—namely, armor. Over a decade ago, the Congressionally-mandated Overseas Basing Commission (OBC) cautioned against a plan by the President George W. Bush administration to remove all US armored units from Europe.<sup>8</sup> That plan went forward anyway, and today the OBC's concerns appear prescient.

Additionally, the plan to conduct heel-to-toe rotations represents an important improvement over current deployments of US forces to northeastern Europe. Gaps, or underlaps, between current deployments of US- and Europe-based American units potentially offer windows of opportunity for Russian adventurism in Eastern Europe. Turning discrete deployments into heel-to-toe rotations means the elimination of underlaps between returning and deploying units—as well as the elimination of months-long underlaps in the presence of armored units in northeastern Europe.

Finally, and more broadly, the increase in ERI funding and American military presence in Europe signals a growing understanding in Washington that the alliance needs to move toward a “new normal” in Eastern Europe and the United States must lead it there in close coordination with Berlin, Paris, and London. The Poles and the Baltic states in particular want to know the alliance has a mid-term plan beyond a mere tripwire and the Obama administration's ERI funding increase is an important step in that process.<sup>9</sup>

For all these reasons, the ERI funding increase and the force-structure moves that comprise it are a step in the right direction. However, the moves fall short of the dramatic headlines. Perhaps more importantly,

7 Mark Landler and Helene Cooper, “US Fortifying Europe's East to Deter Putin,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2016; Lolita C. Baldor, “US to Beef Up Military Presence in Eastern Europe,” *The Associated Press*, March 30, 2016; and “USA Plans to Significantly Increase Military Presence in Eastern Europe,” *Baltic News Network*, February 2, 2016, [www.bnn-news.com/usa-plans-to-significantly-increase-military-presence-in-eastern-europe-137731](http://www.bnn-news.com/usa-plans-to-significantly-increase-military-presence-in-eastern-europe-137731).

8 *Commission on Review of Overseas Military Facility Structure of the United States* (Arlington, VA: Commission on Review of Overseas Military Facility Structure, May 9, 2005) also known as the *Overseas Basing Commission, Preliminary Report to the President and the US Congress*, <https://fas.org/irp/agency/dod/obc.pdf>.

9 Interview with a senior political appointee within the Polish Ministry of Defense, March 2, 2016.

the US approach to reassurance and deterrence still suffers from some strategic shortcomings as well.

### Necessary but Insufficient

As argued above, the ERI funding increase and the rotationally deployed forces it will pay for are necessary steps. However, for several reasons the plan outlined to date is not quite sufficient to achieve broader objectives necessary to safeguard Western interests. For starters, the size of the additional force—roughly 4,200 troops—is inadequate to deter the Russian military by denial. Moscow has shown it can muster tens of thousands of troops for its snap exercises, often without NATO having any advance warning.<sup>10</sup> Aided by interior lines of communication—as well as reduced Western capacity to detect and interpret warnings and indicators of Russian military movements and intentions—Moscow can quickly assemble a force orders of magnitude larger than a single armored brigade, thereby providing the Kremlin with the capacity to overrun the “beefed up” American presence easily.<sup>11</sup>

It is true other allies—specifically, the United Kingdom and Germany—also are planning to begin or are considering heel-to-toe rotations.<sup>12</sup> However, these additional force structure contributions will be relatively small—perhaps hundreds of troops each, at most. For this reason, the United States and its allies appear to be only strengthening their ability to deter by punishment—that is, adding to the tripwire of American and other allied forces in northeastern Europe.

Further frustrating efforts at deterrence-by-denial is the fact that the rotationally deployed US brigade will be split among six countries—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. This dispersed deployment will likely prevent the brigade from easily and quickly achieving mass and hence its full potential during a time of crisis. Dispersed deployment will also make it more expensive and more time consuming to assemble the brigade for the purpose of training in a single location.

More importantly, the dispersed deployment does not make sense geo-strategically. In short, it makes no sense to deploy parts of the brigade to Bulgaria and Romania when the challenge Russia poses on the ground is not particularly salient to either country. Admittedly, Russia does still maintain troops and an impressive arsenal of military ammunition and equipment in Transnistria, the breakaway region of Moldova. However, this is a miniscule personnel presence by Russia’s standards, amounting to roughly 1,500 troops.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the number of ethnic Russians in Tulcea, the Romanian county that borders Ukraine along the Black Sea, amounts to just 5 percent of the population there. Across all of Romania, ethnic Russians comprise about one tenth of one percent—the same is true in Bulgaria.

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10 Thomas Frear, “Anatomy of a Russian Exercise,” *European Leadership Network*, August 12, 2015, [www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/anatomy-of-a-russian-exercise\\_2914.html](http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/anatomy-of-a-russian-exercise_2914.html).

11 John Vandiver, “Breedlove Tells Congress US Must Rebuild Forces in Europe to Confront Newly Aggressive Russia,” *Stars and Stripes*, February 25, 2016, [www.stripes.com/news/breedlove-tells-congress-us-must-rebuild-forces-in-europe-to-confront-newly-aggressive-russia-1.396034](http://www.stripes.com/news/breedlove-tells-congress-us-must-rebuild-forces-in-europe-to-confront-newly-aggressive-russia-1.396034).

12 Callum Paton, “UK Commits to Long-Term Troop Deployment in Baltic States as NATO Checks Russian Aggression,” *International Business Times*, October 8, 2015.

13 *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute for Security Studies, 2016), 188.



In contrast, the challenges posed by Russia on the ground in north-eastern Europe are far more acute. There, Russia can quickly amass thousands of troops just across the border from allied territory, and it could conceivably exploit the sizeable Russian minorities in Estonia (25 percent) and Latvia (26 percent) as a pretext for adventurism.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Baltic states lack strategic depth, complicating allied efforts to defend, reinforce, and/or counter covert or overt Russian actions. In sum, it is entirely unclear from a military perspective why *any* portion of the rotational brigade should be based in southeastern Europe. Instead, the alliance and its most at-risk members would be far better off if the *entire* brigade were based in the Baltic states.

In addition to being geographically misaligned, the ERI is also fiscally misaligned. Certainly, the ERI's \$3.4 billion is no small amount, but it is a funding line that resides in the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) account, not the Department of Defense's base budget. This somewhat arcane distinction implies a lack of constancy in Washington's outlook, but more importantly it prevents DoD from programming the rotational brigade requirement into future year budget planning. Politically, it is probably safe to assume for now the ERI will retain the support it has had over the last two years, but the fact that ERI is *not* a program of record in the base budget puts it at greater risk. Moving the ERI into the base budget is not without its challenges though, not the least of which is figuring out what *other* priority requirement it should displace in an environment of tight service budgets.

The ERI initiative also suffers from command and control shortcomings. Its centerpiece—the heavy rotational brigade—as well as the other two US brigades permanently forward stationed in Europe, will lack a dedicated intermediate-level command and control element. In other words, there is no American divisional command based in Europe, again thanks to the deep, hasty drawdowns of the last 15 years. Instead, the 4th Infantry Division maintains a roughly 100-person “mission command element” in Germany, prepared to expand if and when necessary—assuming the facilities it relies upon in Baumholder are not vacated in yet another round of downsizing. At least one analysis has shown a division headquarters sent from the United States may not arrive in time to make a difference in the fate of the Baltic States.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to lacking sufficient command and control, the announcement of the rotational deployment lacked any multilateral framework. Given the cuts in force structure across the alliance since the end of the Cold War, NATO's operations and deployments have become increasingly multinational. Two generations ago, at the height of the Cold War, multinationality within NATO force structure essentially stopped at the corps level. A single generation ago, as NATO became heavily involved in peacekeeping operations in the Western Balkans, multinationality went as far as the division level. Today, multinationality within NATO operations extends beyond the brigade and occasionally to the battalion level or company level—for instance, a US infantry company served

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14 These figures comes from the 2016 *CIA World Factbook*, which also estimates that ethnic Russians comprise 6 percent of Lithuania's population.

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

within a Romanian battalion in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> However, the announced rotational deployment lacked any kind of multinational framework and is instead a series of bilateral efforts between the United States and several allies, even though it had been known for many months that Germany and the United Kingdom were considering or planning similar deployments. Reportedly, the US rotational brigade deployment will be cast as part of a broader allied plan announced at the July 2016 Warsaw Summit, so perhaps then this bilateral move will be placed within an appropriate multinational context that can be used to incentivize force contributions from other allies.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the ERI plan failed to include a moratorium—if only couched in ‘for the foreseeable future’ terms—on further US unit draw-downs and facility closures in Europe. As a practical matter, such a moratorium would admittedly have limited impact, given the dramatic cuts to US forward presence to date—in other words, there is not much left to cut. However, as a political and rhetorical matter, such an announcement would contribute to reversing European perceptions the Obama administration has been too preoccupied with rebalancing to Asia and/or fighting extremists in the Middle East. It would also counter the notion the ERI lacks constancy given its placement in the OCO account, as discussed above.

### Fit for Purpose?

If the administration had addressed each of the shortcomings outlined above, it still remains unclear whether a rotationally deployed armored brigade is really the right tool for the challenge Russia poses in northeastern Europe. A US armored brigade is best suited to counter the worst-case scenario of a Russian conventional attack against allied forces. A Russian attack on the Baltic States would certainly be catastrophic for European security, but it is highly unlikely. This is not just the perspective of various academic and think-tank analysts—it is also the view of US military commanders on the ground in northeastern Europe.<sup>18</sup> Even Russian President Vladimir Putin—in an interview with an Italian newspaper—claimed that only in a “mad person’s dream” could one imagine Russia would attack NATO.<sup>19</sup> Putin is certainly no paragon of honesty, so it is unclear whether this statement amounts to sufficient reassurance for the purposes of the Baltic States and Poland.

Therefore, a forward-based heavy brigade—or two, or three—is necessary as an insurance policy for the less likely, catastrophic case of a Russian invasion.

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16 Jerry Wilson, “1-4 Infantry Leaves Legacy of Team Work in Afghanistan,” *Army*, January 31, 2011, [www.army.mil/article/51087/1\\_4\\_Infantry\\_leaves\\_legacy\\_of\\_team\\_work\\_in\\_Afghanistan](http://www.army.mil/article/51087/1_4_Infantry_leaves_legacy_of_team_work_in_Afghanistan).

17 Julian Barnes and Anton Troianovski, “NATO Allies Preparing to Put Four Battalions at Eastern Border With Russia,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2016.

18 See for example, Matthew Kroenig, “Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War,” *Survival* 57, no. 1 (2015): 49-70; Mark Kramer, “The New Russian Chill in the Baltic,” *Current History* 114, no. 770 (March 2015): 108-114; Robert Person, “6 Reasons Not to Worry about Russia Invading the Baltics,” *The Washington Post*, November 12, 2015; and Sydney J. Freedberg, Jr., “Putin Won’t Blitz Baltic States—But NATO Has A Plan...,” *Breaking Defense*, March 2, 2015, [www.breakingdefense.com/2015/03/putin-wont-blitz-baltic-states-but-nato-has-a-plan/](http://www.breakingdefense.com/2015/03/putin-wont-blitz-baltic-states-but-nato-has-a-plan/).

19 Vladimir Putin, Interview with the Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*, July 7, 2015, [www.corriere.it/english/15\\_giugno\\_07/vladimir-putin-interview-to-the-italian-newspaper-corriere-sera-44c5a66c-0d12-11e5-8612-1eda5b996824.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/english/15_giugno_07/vladimir-putin-interview-to-the-italian-newspaper-corriere-sera-44c5a66c-0d12-11e5-8612-1eda5b996824.shtml).



What is more likely to emanate from the Kremlin, though, is a form of ambiguous or hybrid warfare—that is, operations and activities designed to help Moscow achieve political objectives in Europe without crossing the threshold that would trigger an Article 5 response on the part of NATO.<sup>20</sup> If so, a heavy brigade is unlikely to be of great utility to the West. For instance, a heavy brigade is probably not the best choice for building resilience within civil governance institutions, for enhancing military-civilian cooperation during a crisis, for augmenting border observation and control, for strengthening information operations capabilities, for conducting offensive and defensive cyber operations, or for engaging with adversaries across the entire electro-magnetic spectrum.

It is here—in managing the most likely challenges from Russia—that the ERI needs to be augmented with additional tools beyond a heavy brigade and tons of prepositioned equipment. Although the FY2017 ERI spending request includes \$20 million for increased intelligence analysis and \$24 million for additional State Partnership Program activities, these relatively small amounts of money are unlikely to address the array of most likely challenges facing American allies in northeastern Europe.

## Conclusion

The plan to expand the ERI program, with the rotationally deployed armor brigade as its centerpiece, is a step in the right direction. Along with the other elements of the ERI effort, the heavy brigade will address some of the shortcomings of the US and allied responses to date, such as the absence of a heel-to-toe armored presence. More broadly, it also signals to NATO allies, as well as to Russia, that European security remains a vital interest to the United States.

To think, though, that it alone is sufficient to safeguard vital US interests in Europe and those of America's allies is somewhat short-sighted. The ERI expansion plan suffers from several shortcomings, including its relatively small size in comparison to the conventional threat presented by Russia across the border, and the intention to disperse it across six countries in northeastern and southeastern Europe.

Even if these shortcomings are addressed, there remains the question of whether an armored brigade is really a useful tool given the most likely challenges posed by Russia. Certainly an armored brigade would be helpful—although by no means decisive—in the event of a conventional assault on the Baltic States by Russian forces. However, a direct Russian attack on allied territory remains unlikely. Instead, Russia seems far more likely to pursue its various objectives in Europe and Eurasia through a variety of less overt tactics. An armored brigade is a rather blunt instrument for countering less overt, more “ambiguous” tactics and operations. For this reason, the United States should employ the ERI to build resilience and asymmetric response capabilities across all the Baltic states and Poland. With a change in emphasis, Washington can ensure the ERI is both necessary and sufficient for the task at hand, strengthening its leadership of the alliance during what looks to be an era of fraught NATO-Russia relations.

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<sup>20</sup> For example, see Mary Ellen Connell and Ryan Evans, Rapporteurs, *Russia's “Ambiguous Warfare” and Implications for the US Marine Corps* (Arlington: Center for Naval Analysis, May 2015), 13.