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United States European Command: Overview and Key Issues

History

United States European Command (or EUCOM, pronounced “YEW-com”) is headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, and was established in 1952. Today its area of responsibility comprises 51 countries stretching from Portugal’s Azores Islands to Iceland and Israel. USEUCOM’s commander is currently U.S. Air Force General Tod Wolters, who is simultaneously the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR). During the Cold War, the European theater was a primary focus for U.S. defense and national security and EUCOM was focused almost exclusively on deterring, and if necessary defeating, the Soviet Union. At the height of the Cold War, there were more than 400,000 U.S. troops stationed in Europe.

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a withdrawal of the bulk of forward-deployed U.S. troops in the European theater. Decisions to do so were arguably based on a number of strategic assumptions held by successive administrations after the end of the Cold War, including that

- Europe could be stable, whole, and free;
- Russia could be a constructive partner in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture; and
- particularly prior to September 11, 2001, threats posed by terrorism and migration from the Middle East/North Africa region were limited.

EUCOM subsequently focused its activities on non-warfighting missions, including building the security capacity and capability of former Soviet bloc states, prosecuting “crisis management” operations in the Balkans, and logistically supporting other combatant commands (by providing, in particular, critical medical evacuation facilities at Landstuhl), including U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM).

Over the past 25 years, decisions regarding U.S. basing and posture in the European theater have largely reflected these assumptions. The bulk of U.S. forces in Europe have been withdrawn and many bases and outposts were either consolidated or closed. However, two Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) were retained (in Italy and Germany) as were some naval bases, particularly those along NATO’s southern flank, and a number of Air Force bases that were deemed critical for supporting operations in the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

USEUCOM’s Current Geopolitical Challenges

Events in recent years, particularly since 2014, have tested, if not undermined, the strategic assumptions underpinning EUCOM’s posture. To Europe’s east, Russia annexed Crimea, began a proxy war in Eastern Ukraine, and is

modernizing its conventional and nonconventional forces. Russia also increased its military activities in Europe’s high north, particularly through reportedly adding nuclear-capable missiles to Kaliningrad (a Russian territory on the Baltic Sea that is not contiguous with Russia itself), enhancing its air patrolling activities close to other states’ airspace, and enhancing its naval presence in the Baltic Sea, the Arctic Ocean, and the North Sea. Taken together, these moves have heightened some congressional concerns about Russian aggression and its implications for NATO territories, particularly among Central and Eastern European NATO allies.

To Europe’s south, instability resulting in part from the “Arab Spring” led to collapse of states, civil war in some instances, and significant refugee flows into Europe. The conflicts in Iraq and Syria are examples, although some European countries are also concerned about conditions in Libya. This has led to political tensions across the broader European Union, and to concerns about terrorists “embedding” within refugee flows. In 2014, EUCOM began transforming itself back into a warfighting command, while retaining its missions to support CENTCOM and AFRICOM, perform crisis management operations, and build partner states’ security capacity.

U.S. Forces in Europe Today

The United States fields two primary types of forces in Europe: permanent and rotational. “Permanent” refers to those U.S. personnel who live in Europe and are assigned to U.S. European Command. The length of these assignments for most service members is between three and five years. Approximately 74,000 personnel are permanently assigned to EUCOM. These include

- 34,000 Army personnel,
- 27,000 Air Force personnel,
- 3,000 Marine personnel, and
- 10,000 Navy personnel.

An additional 20,000 permanent DOD civilians are also authorized for EUCOM and its supporting commands. Finally, on February 11, 2020, DOD announced the reactivation of the V Corps headquarters in Fort Knox, KY, which will provide command and control for U.S., allied and partner formations in Europe. Once a site for a forward command post is selected, approximately 200 V Corps personnel will rotate through Europe.

Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, DOD has also increased its rotations of temporary forces in and out of EUCOM to assure allies of the United States’ commitment to their security. Dubbed “heel-to-toe” rotations, air, ground and naval assets are deployed from the continental United States to conduct exercises with NATO allies for several

months; they are then immediately replaced by other like units. U.S. ground forces have been largely stationed in Poland, with elements also conducting training and exercises in the Baltic States, Bulgaria, Romania, and Germany. The “heel-to-toe” rotations are part of Operation Atlantic Resolve (OAR). The European Deterrence Initiative (EDI, formerly called the European Reassurance Initiative; see below) is the key mechanism through which activities under OAR are organized and funded.

Several observers have asserted that it might be more politically reassuring and financially efficient to permanently station these “heel-to-toe” rotational forces. Others contend that these rotations force military units in the continental United States to routinely test their ability to deploy to other theaters and exercise critical logistics capabilities. The Polish government has suggested the United States establish a permanent base on its territory; doing so would presumably require deploying additional troops to Europe or moving those already stationed there.

European Command and NATO

EUCOM and NATO, while strategically interconnected, are different organizations with different missions. NATO is an alliance of 29 nations that are signatories to the 1949 Washington Treaty; the United States is a NATO member. U.S. European Command, by contrast, is the focal point for the United States military’s presence in Europe. Only some of EUCOM’s activities support NATO’s operations and activities; the remainder advance U.S. objectives with individual countries, across the region, and across the Middle East and Africa, though they do generally reinforce NATO as well. The complementary nature of these dual roles and missions is one of the rationales behind dual-hatting the Commander of U.S. European Command as NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander, Europe.

Since 2014, EUCOM has been a key architect of and contributor to NATO reassurance and deterrence initiatives. EUCOM has led numerous multinational training exercises and rotational deployments of land, air, and naval assets. Since 2017, the United States has commanded one of the four NATO battalions that make up NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The U.S. battalion, based in Poland, consists of close to 900 U.S. troops and 300 additional troops from Croatia, Romania, and the UK. The U.S. EFP is a “heel-to-toe” unit.

Burden Sharing?

Some observers contend that European allies have not invested sufficient resources in their militaries, and that as a result, the United States has shouldered too much of the financial burden associated with Europe’s defense. Such observers often contend that while the United States spends 3.75% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defense, most of NATO’s allies in Europe have not yet met a 2014 pledge to increase their defense budgets to 2% of GDP by 2024. Others argue that the United States spends significantly more on defense than its European allies because the United States has global responsibilities that are independent of Europe’s security. It is difficult to parse the

defense budget in a manner that identifies what specific percentage is dedicated to operations and presence in Europe. Whatever the percentage, the investment is intended to enable the United States to conduct military operations in the Middle East and Africa and to respond rapidly to other crises.

EUCOM Funding

DOD budget documentation does not break out total funding by combatant command. Forces and operations assigned to the commands are, in general, funded by the military services (either in their regular, or base, budgets or with funding designated for Overseas Contingency Operations, or OCO). Combatant command funding is, with some exceptions, limited to Operation and Maintenance (O&M) accounts for headquarters and mission support activities. In the case of EUCOM, the U.S. Army is the Combatant Command Support Agent (CCSA) and primarily responsible for funding its headquarters. For FY2020, the Army requested approximately \$320.0 million in the O&M budget subactivity group (SAG) for U.S. European Command, including \$146.4 million in base funding and \$173.7 million in OCO funding.

European Deterrence Initiative

Since its establishment in 2014 with funding designated for Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), EDI has prioritized the following activities:

- increased military presence, particularly through “heel-to-toe” rotations;
- additional military exercises and training;
- improved infrastructure;
- prepositioning equipment; and
- enhancing programs to build interoperability with countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

For FY2020, the Trump Administration requested \$5.9 billion in OCO funding for EDI, including the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI). Appropriations associated with EDI are located in multiple titles and budget lines. Some observers contend that EDI should be made part of the “base” defense budget rather than part of OCO. Doing so, in their view, has two primary advantages. First, it would signal to allies that U.S. security commitments to Europe are enduring, and second, programs and capabilities that EDI supports are no longer “contingency” operations, but rather a part of DOD’s regular programming. Others counter that shifting EDI to the base budget would subject EDI to inter-service rivalries and priorities within the Pentagon, which may differ from those of EUCOM.

Further Reading

CRS In Focus IF10542, *Defense Primer: Commanding U.S. Military Operations*, by Kathleen J. McInnis

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