

## Don't Fear a U.S. Troop Withdrawal From Germany

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According to Washington's punditocracy, there are only two ways to interpret the [Pentagon's announcement Wednesday](#) that it plans to move ahead with withdrawing nearly 12,000 U.S. troops currently stationed in Germany. One view is that President Donald Trump is capitulating yet again to pressure from Russian President Vladimir Putin and handing Putin a gift in the form of a weakened NATO. The other take is that the White House decision to pull troops out of Germany, as Trump has long wanted, is a foolish escalation in his standoff with German Chancellor Angela Merkel over the future of the trans-Atlantic alliance.

Both interpretations are correct. There are, nonetheless, additional and wider implications not only for the future of NATO, but for the coming battle in Congress over a likely reduction in discretionary spending on American defense and how all of these factors might fit with notions of a [new era of American "restraint."](#) For decades, the United States has spent more on defense than China, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea and Brazil—combined, [according to the Peter G. Peterson Foundation](#). About 15 percent of all federal spending goes to defense. With Trump's abject mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic driving the American economy ever closer to the brink of a full-blown depression, there will likely be a significant decrease in defense spending starting next year.

Whether left, right or centrist, [many Americans agree](#) that it is time for the era of U.S.-led military interventions and forever wars to wind down. Whether that equates to less use of American military power in favor of a return to a more consultative form of multilateralism or Trump's brand of "America First" isolationism depends on where you sit on the spectrum between the Democratic and Republican parties. But both of those prevailing views are out of step with an emerging era of regionalism within different hemispheres in which states are fast becoming the handmaidens of [extreme capital concentration](#), digital disruption, climate change and now [Anthropocene-era pandemics](#).

NATO has served its purpose well for the past 70 years, and it will likely endure in some form for many years to come, if only out of inertia. It must be acknowledged, though, that a huge bureaucracy that stitches together relations with military forces of 28 nations is never going to be nimble enough to respond to the kinds of security threats that defy geography. That is not to say that NATO is irrelevant or that it will be anytime soon. NATO's concept of interoperability—creating a system for coordinating military action across national, cultural and technological barriers—was revolutionary, and it continues to give those countries in the alliance an edge over rivals like China and Russia.

The announced drawdown of 11,900 American forces in Germany will reduce the number of U.S. troops there from 36,000 to about 24,000. It calls for 6,400 soldiers to return home to the United States, and for about 5,600 to be redeployed to Belgium and Italy, including an Air Force squadron of approximately 2,500 personnel that will likely head to [northwest Italy's Aviano Air Base](#), where the Air Force's 31st Fighter Wing is stationed. Given that Aviano was the site of a [joint NATO F-35 fighter jet training exercise last year](#), and with escalating tensions in the Mediterranean emanating from the proxy war in Libya, there is probably more than a little bit of strategic logic at play that benefits Europe as much as it does the United States. Plus, the conspicuous lack of any specifics from Defense Secretary Mark Esper this week on

what will happen to the Germany-based headquarters of the U.S. military command for Africa, or AFRICOM as it is better known, suggests that a move to Tunisia, Morocco or any one of the other [34 bases AFRICOM currently occupies](#) is not off the table.

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Moreover, as indicated by U.S. plans to reshuffle troops to the Black Sea region, American military planners understand well that a ground war in Europe with Russia is far less likely than a salami-slicing series of air- and sea-based confrontations near the littoral zones of Southern Europe and North and East Africa. There are also some practical reasons for reshuffling several thousand troops to Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Over the past decade, Russia has transformed its Kaliningrad Oblast on the edge of the Baltic Sea into a nearly impenetrable fortress, and expanded the size of its Western Military District, which stretches down to the Black Sea along Russia's buffer zone facing Western Europe. Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, which all have borders on the Baltic Sea, have increased their shares of defense spending to the threshold 2 percent of GDP required of all NATO members. Germany and France, Europe's wealthiest countries, have meanwhile hovered around 1.3 and 1.8 percent, respectively.

In the end, the U.S. troop shift in Germany may in fact be a smart move that achieves the dual goals of positioning NATO to manage evolving security threats and incentivizing European powers to pick up more of the slack on regional defense. The trans-Atlantic military alliance, however, may never be well positioned for what the scholar [Peter Pomerantsev has called the "war against reality"](#)—a suspended state of neither war nor peace in which the "border between civilian and soldier, rumor and evidence, audience and actor" is blurred. As the frozen conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia and the breakaway region of Transnistria in Moldova illustrate, more boots on the ground in Germany are not going to solve the problem of Russian influence operations in the Baltics or the rest of Europe. Nor are troop levels in Europe or a "better NATO" going to solve the problem of rising authoritarianism caused by democratic decay from within. NATO has its limits, and in terms of ushering in an era of American restraint, it is a good thing to acknowledge that up front.

Plus, there is a logic behind the Pentagon's ongoing internal review of defense resources and the restructuring of force allocations in Europe, and it is actually fairly sound. In the age of automation and tech wars, why cut toys when you can cut troops? In the long run, a lot more money may be saved on logistics support and benefits for forces housed in overseas bases. Spending big on items on the [Pentagon's multibillion-dollar wish list](#), like a [warp drive for propelling spaceships and satellites or an invisibility cloak](#), might be out of line, but only a handful of progressive stalwarts are likely to fight spending big on expanding American cyber and artificial intelligence capabilities in light of recent challenges from China and Russia.

Moreover, the idea of investing in defense technology and using overseas basing as a means of generating growth in the wider American economy is as old as the country itself. See, for example, [Arpanet](#) and the [Combatant Commands](#). Many things will change between now and the time Trump eventually departs the scene and NATO gets its act together. Whether that's a few months from now or a few years from now, the innovations in defense technology and responsive force management that have made the United States a military superpower are not likely to be on the chopping block any time soon.

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