

Ideology, Not Strategy, Explains the US Troop Withdrawal from Germany

by Riccardo Alcaro

The Pentagon has finally confirmed that the United States will indeed begin scaling back its military presence in Germany,¹ a decision previously anticipated² by US President Donald Trump.

The announced reductions are anything but cosmetic. The US contingent deployed in Germany will shrink by 12,000 to 24,000 units – the lowest level since the end of World War II (WWII). In addition, the two Unified Combatant Commands the US Armed Forces maintain abroad, the European Command (EUCOM) and the Africa Command (AFRICOM), both based in the German city of Stuttgart, will be re-located. EUCOM will probably move

to Mons (Belgium), where NATO's integrated command is based. As for AFRICOM, there is still no specific indication of its future whereabouts.

While both commands will remain in Europe and part of the US military assets will be deployed to other NATO members, 6,400 US troops will leave the Old Continent for good. This represents a tangible reduction of the US military footprint. Why has the United States opted for this move?

The Trump administration has offered two separate explanations.

The first one is that the United States has been compelled to review its military cooperation with Germany in the face of the latter's "delinquency" (in Trump's own words) on financing its own defence.³ German military

¹ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "U.S. Will Cut 12,000 Forces in Germany", in *The New York Times*, 29 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/world/europe/us-troops-nato-germany.html>.

² "Trump Approves Plan to Withdraw 9,500 US Troops from Germany", in *BBC News*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53248177>.

³ AP, "'Germany is Delinquent': Trump Defends US Withdrawal of 12,000 Troops", in *The Guardian*, 29 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2020/jul/29/>

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spending hovers around 1.3 per cent of GDP,⁴ which is ways below the 2 per cent threshold that was unanimously agreed upon by NATO member states back in 2014.⁵

The second explanation concerns the need for US defence planners to adapt military deployments overseas to today's challenges, ranging from containing Russia and strengthening NATO to prioritising extra-European theatres in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific.⁶

These explanations contain more than a grain of truth. Nevertheless, a closer look will demonstrate that both are ultimately unconvincing.

Consider first the insufficient level of German military spending. While still far from crossing the 2 per cent threshold, Germany has nonetheless been constantly, if incrementally, increasing its defence budget, which in absolute terms (49.3 billion dollars in 2019) more or less matched that of Europe's main military spenders, France (50.1 billion) and the United Kingdom (48.7 billion).⁷ Besides, those US forces that will remain in Europe will be deployed to two countries whose

military spending is equivalent or even inferior to Germany's, namely Italy (1.4 per cent of GDP) and Belgium (0.9 per cent). If the US administration's intent was to make clear it would not tolerate European reluctance to invest more in defence, the message has turned out to be quite contradictory.

What about the more systemic reasons for the troop drawdown? Here too the explanation is marred by a number of inconsistencies.

While not nearly as central as it was during the Cold War, the European theatre has regained in importance in recent years, especially as Russia has engaged in military aggression in Ukraine, intimidation in the Baltic area and disinformation campaign – including in the United States itself.

The Pentagon has pledged that part of the troops repatriated from Germany will be re-deployed to NATO countries closer to Russia, and has already secured an agreement with Poland to send there 1,000 additional troops.⁸ Yet these will be either rotations or relatively limited permanent deployments, which hardly make up for the reduced planning and operational capacity that will follow the downgrading of US assets in Germany.

More importantly, if indeed the intention in Washington is that of strengthening NATO and more

[germany-is-delinquent-trump-defends-us-withdrawal-of-12000-troops-video](#).

⁴ Nan Tian et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2019", in *SIPRI Fact Sheets*, April 2020, p. 2, <https://www.sipri.org/node/5103>.

⁵ NATO, *Wales Summit Declaration*, 5 September 2014, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm.

⁶ "Defense Secretary Esper News Conference", in *C-SPAN*, 29 July 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?474327-1>.

⁷ Nan Tian et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2019", cit., p. 2.

⁸ "US to Withdraw or Relocate More Troops in Germany Than Previously Thought", in *Deutsche Welle*, 29 July 2020, <https://p.dw.com/p/3g7Y4>; Katrina Manson and James Shotter, "US to Send 1,000 More Military Personnel to Poland", in *Financial Times*, 3 August 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/43f98b00-1fa5-4a0b-aa85-cc4e8aab29ac>.

effectively containing Russia, inter-allied coordination is not only politically advisable but necessary in strategic and operational terms. Yet, not only has the United States not felt compelled to adequately inform Germany and other European allies about the planned reductions,⁹ but it has failed to engage them in any in-depth discussions about how to restructure NATO's force posture. Unsurprisingly, Russia has been among the few to publicly welcome the US decision.¹⁰

The partial withdrawal from Germany – or at least the way it was handled – is strategically short-sighted even considering America's greater involvement in extra-European theatres. US bases in Germany are key the logistics of US military projection into the Middle East (indeed even Afghanistan), and AFRICOM is obviously responsible for planning and overseeing operations in Africa. Relocating these assets elsewhere will take time and money without generating any tangible advantage to US force projection capabilities.

Politically, the decision – and even more so the way it was announced and implemented – injects a degree of acrimony into the relationship with Germany and therefore complicate efforts to coordinate transatlantic action on issues of great interest to the United States, most notably handling

the rise of China.

Due to its leading role in the European Union, Germany is the key to build a more cohesive transatlantic coalition to thwart China's attempts to gain influence through unfair economic practices, the political use of technology exports and direct investment, as well as assertiveness both on the domestic front (in Hong Kong and Xinjiang) and internationally (over the South China Sea and Taiwan).

Although Germany's China policy reflects a wider array of strategic considerations than the health of US-German military cooperation, Trump's decision undoubtedly raises the political costs for German politicians to meet the United States' persistent demands to fall in line with Washington's policy of confrontation of China.¹¹

In conclusion, the net result of the decision to downsize the US military footprint in Germany is a further crack in the transatlantic relationship, which nonetheless remains crucial to enabling and expanding US power abroad. Predictably, the decision has met with bipartisan criticism in Congress.¹²

What to make of all this? The reality is that tracing the partial withdrawal of US assets from Germany back to badly thought-out considerations hardly

⁹ Philip Oltermann, "German Ministers Hit Back at Trump Plan to Withdraw US Troops", in *The Guardian*, 17 June 2020, <https://gu.com/p/e4qc5>.

¹⁰ AP, "Russia Welcomes Prospect of American Troop Pullback from Germany", in *Star Tribune*, 11 June 2020, <http://strib.mn/3hhYS7Q>.

¹¹ Marc Santora, "Pompeo Calls China's Ruling Party 'Central Threat of Our Times'", in *The New York Times*, 30 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/30/world/europe/pompeo-uk-china-huawei.html>.

¹² Julian Borger, "Democrats and Republicans Take Aim at Pompeo over US Troop Withdrawal from Germany", in *The Guardian*, 30 July 2020, <https://gu.com/p/eec44>.

stands to reason. Those offered by the administration are in fact ex-post justifications of a decision that stems not so much from strategic reflections as from convictions deeply rooted in President Trump's mind.

The troop reduction is a punitive measure against a country the president has consistently and openly shown contempt for.¹³

In Trump's eyes, federal Germany embodies every ill produced by the United States' post-WWII foreign policy. It is not only the result of US military commitments, which indirectly discourage allies to provide for their own defence, but also of American support for European integration.

The latter is for Trump an even graver sin, as the European Union amplifies Germany's trade power to the extent it can rival with the United States itself. Trump has made his reading of the European Union as a "vehicle" for German influence¹⁴ that was set up to take advantage of the United States¹⁵

abundantly clear.

Worse still, post-WWII Germany – especially under Chancellor Angela Merkel – has emerged as a largely open, tolerant and cosmopolitan society dedicated to multilateral cooperation, the building blocks of the liberal ideology the United States has for seven decades adorned its hegemony with and which the US president considers an unmitigated disaster.

For Trump, Germany is like a distorting mirror in which he sees the fictional image of a weak, gullible and delusional United States. Punishing it is a way to restore the primacy of nationalism over liberalism, coercion over persuasion, and of America over anyone else – friend and foe alike.

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¹³ Hal Brands, "U.S.-Germany Crisis Goes Deeper Than Trump's Planned Troop Cuts", in *Bloomberg*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-06-10/trump-cutting-troops-in-germany-is-about-merkel-not-security>.

¹⁴ Henry Mance, Shawn Donnan and James Shotter, "Donald Trump Takes Swipe at EU as 'Vehicle for Germany'", in *Financial Times*, 16 January 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/1f7c6746-db75-11e6-9d7c-be108f1c1dce>.

¹⁵ Thomas Colson, "Trump Says the European Union Was 'Formed in Order to Take Advantage of the United States'", in *Business Insider*, 15 July 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-says-european-union-formed-take-advantage-united-states-2020-7>.

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