



Updated March 30, 2022

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. USEUCOM’s commander, U.S. Air Force General Tod D. Wolters, 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 and the Warsaw Pact. 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 and the Warsaw Pact 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 in recent decades 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 were designed to support expeditionary and cooperative security operations. The bulk of U.S. forces in Europe have been withdrawn and many bases and outposts were either consolidated or closed.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 south, 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 occupied Crimea and launched a separatist war in eastern Ukraine, is modernizing its conventional and nonconventional forces, and launched an invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Russia also increased its military activities in Europe’s north, particularly by 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 increasing its naval presence in the Baltic Sea, the Arctic Ocean, and the North Sea. Taken together, these moves have heightened congressional concerns about Russian aggression and its implications for NATO territories, particularly 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; some European countries are also concerned about conditions in Libya. This has led to political tensions across the broader European Union, as well as 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 servicemembers is between three and five years. On February 11, 2020, the Department of Defense (DOD) announced the reactivation of the V Corps headquarters at Fort Knox, KY, with a forward site in Poland, which will provide operational command and control for U.S., allied, and partner formations in Europe.

Rotational Forces

Since the Russian occupation of Crimea and areas of eastern Ukraine 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. Of these rotations, 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 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. Studies comparing the expenses of permanent versus rotational forces argue that in the medium- to long-term, rotational forces are more costly than permanently stationed troops.

Response to Russia's 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation” to protect the civilian population and to “demilitarize” and “de-Nazify” Ukraine (the latter term understood by many observers as a false pretext for overthrowing the democratically elected Ukrainian government). According to DOD, an additional 15,000 U.S. soldiers have deployed to Europe since early February 2022 to augment defense and deterrence efforts, bringing the total U.S. force posture in Europe, including permanently stationed forces, to approximately 100,000 military personnel. The new deployments bring the total U.S. military presence in Poland to about 9,500—including 800 soldiers deployed to the U.S.-led NATO battlegroup—and in Romania to about 1,900. In addition, about 800 U.S. soldiers and 20 attack helicopters have been deployed to the Baltic region, along with eight F-35 joint strike fighters deployed to NATO’s eastern flank. An additional 7,000 U.S. soldiers, including an armored Brigade Combat Team, have deployed to Germany to reinforce deterrence efforts.

FY2022 Supplemental Funding for Ukraine

As part of the Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022 (Division N of P.L. 117-103), Congress provided \$13.6 billion in emergency funding for the situation in Ukraine and for related expenses, including \$6.528 billion for DOD. The DOD funding included \$3.028 billion for EUCOM operations mission support, the deployment of personnel to the region, and intelligence support, and \$3.5 billion to replenish U.S. stocks of equipment sent to Ukraine, according to a summary of the legislation released by the House Appropriations Committee.

European Command and NATO

EUCOM and NATO, while strategically interconnected, are different organizations with different missions. NATO is an alliance of 30 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.

Burdensharing

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has heightened questions about NATO’s capacity and willingness to defend NATO’s eastern member states from a potential attack. Since early February 2022, NATO has more than tripled its force presence in Poland and the three Baltic states—from about

5,000 troops in early February to more than 18,000 in mid-March. Critics maintain that NATO’s force posture may not be sufficient to deter or defend against a potential Russian invasion and that doing so will require greater defense investments by European allies. As of 2021, 10 allies met NATO’s guideline to devote at least 2% of GDP to annual defense spending. Since Russia’s invasion, several allies, including Germany, have said they would significantly increase defense spending, and the allies are expected to consider more substantive changes to NATO’s force posture in Eastern Europe, including possibly endorsing permanent stationing of troops in the region. Long-standing concerns that the United States has shouldered too much of the burden associated with Europe’s defense could affect discussions over possible longer-term changes to U.S. force posture in Europe in response to Russia’s invasion.

EUCOM Funding

DOD budget documentation does not typically enumerate total funding by combatant command. Forces and operations assigned to the commands are, in general, funded by the military services. Funding identified in the budget as being for a combatant command is, with some exceptions, largely 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 is primarily responsible for funding its headquarters. For FY2022, the Army requested \$293.9 million in the O&M line item for EUCOM, according to DOD budget documents. Congress provided \$299.2 million for this activity—\$5.3 million (1.8%) more than the request, according to the explanatory statement accompanying the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2022 (Division C of P.L. 117-103).

European Deterrence Initiative (EDI)

The initiative currently known as EDI was established in 2014. For FY2022, the Administration requested \$3.7 billion for EDI, including \$250 million for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI). Appropriations associated with EDI are located in multiple budget line items. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 (P.L. 117-81) and the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2022 (Division C of P.L. 117-103), did not specify a total amount for EDI; the latter provided \$300 million for USAI. A summary of the FY2022 NDAA released by the House Armed Services Committee stated in part that the legislation authorized “\$4 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) and additional investments for EDI purposes.”

Further Reading

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

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