



US forces – between Europe and Asia

by Jan Joel Andersson

On 3 May 2016, with traditional pomp and circumstance, General Curtis M. Scaparrotti replaced General Philip Breedlove as commander of US forces in Europe (EUCOM), and at the same time became NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).

General Scaparrotti assumes command in a very different environment from when his predecessor arrived in Europe three years earlier. Since the US ‘pivot’ to the Asia-Pacific region was announced in 2011/2012, EUCOM has steadily lost resources and forces. During the peak of the Cold War, there were over half a million US personnel assigned to the European theatre of which 200,000 belonged to the US army alone. Today, around 65,000 US military personnel remain permanently stationed in Europe of which some 33,000 are US army soldiers.

However, recent developments to the east and south of Europe have pushed European defence back onto the agenda in Washington. A sign of this was the announcement by US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter in February 2016 to change military spending priorities with more support for NATO allies and more spending on advanced weapons. This reflects a new strategic environment marked by five big evolving geo-strategic challenges: Russian assertiveness; global terrorism and in particular the rise of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL); China; North Korea; and Iran.

Here comes the (US) cavalry

In its new budget request for fiscal year 2017 (which begins on 1 October), the Pentagon has earmarked \$3.4 billion – out of a total request of \$582.7 billion – for its European Reassurance Initiative (ERI); a four-fold increase from the \$789 million for the current budget year. This new funding will allow the US to send more troops to Europe for short-term deployments, including US special operations forces, and provide additional equipment and improve base facilities so that more forces can be sent in the event of a crisis. This increased support will make it possible to maintain the persistent rotational presence of soldiers for one extra armoured brigade combat team (BCTs) – raising the total number of BCTs continuously present in Europe to three.

The additional funding will also support more training and exercises with European allies and partners. By the end of September 2017, the forward stationing of equipment for another armoured brigade combat team and a divisional headquarters should be in place. Together with enablers already in storage in Europe, such as armoured vehicles and equipment, these new assets will allow the US to form a combined armed ground force of more than a division in strength that will be able to respond across the European theatre, if necessary.

The new funding will also make it possible for the US to keep an additional F-15C fighter squadron based in Europe, as well as improve airfield infrastructure

for air force fighters and navy maritime patrol aircraft.

Rebalancing to Asia – to be continued

However, despite this renewed attention given to Europe by Washington, the US continues to ‘rebalance’ forces to the Asia-Pacific region. Today, some 360,000 US military and civilian personnel are assigned to the US Pacific Command (PACOM) area of responsibility. The US Pacific Fleet alone consists of approximately 200 ships, including five aircraft carrier strike groups. The Pentagon’s budget request for fiscal year 2017 reflects how the US is continuing to move even more of its forces to the region – 60% of the navy and overseas air force assets will eventually be based there. Most of its new military capabilities are also being sent to the Asia-Pacific. For example, the US is deploying its most advanced fighters to the region – the F-22 and the F-35 – as well as its latest submarine and the first of a new class of stealth destroyers. Many of the high-end capabilities now being developed are also specifically geared towards the Asia-Pacific region, such as new, long-range stealth bombers and anti-ship cruise missiles.

The US is also considerably expanding its infrastructure in the Asia-Pacific region. Four of the largest military construction projects undertaken by the US since the end of the Cold War are currently underway in Japan, Korea, and Guam. The US has also established new agreements to rotate forces to the Philippines and Australia. Washington has also upped the number of exercises held in the Asia-Pacific.

Doing more with less in Europe

While the Pentagon’s request for an increase in funding for the ERI is an indication that Washington is clearly taking the security situation in Europe more seriously, it should be kept in mind that the new resources intended for the defence of Europe are still rather limited. Recent Russian snap exercises – such as one in Western Russia in February 2014 that mobilised some 150,000 soldiers and 80 warships in the Arctic and Baltic Seas – show the ability of the Russian military to quickly move large forces to the borders of EU’s and NATO’s eastern member states. This fact, together with the demonstrated willingness of Russia to use military force and take political risks, makes conventional deterrence in Europe difficult.

During most of the Cold War, NATO had eight corps defending the West German border in forward deployed positions. Two of these were US army corps equipped with heavy armour and the necessary

support structures. Today, the only current permanent US land combat formations in Europe are the two BCTs of approximately 4,000 men each.

Moreover, the limited US forces in Europe are not only partaking in deterrence and reassurance activities in response to Russian aggression in eastern Europe, but also support US and allied missions in the Middle East and Africa. For example, EUCOM personnel have trained the Ukrainian military, provided support to the US Africa Command’s (AFRICOM) counter-Ebola response in West Africa and support CENTCOM’s counter-ISIL missions in the Middle East.

Although NATO and US forces in Europe, when combined, outnumber Russian forces, they remain primarily based in western Europe. As a result, Russia retains local military superiority in the eastern part of the continent. This has consequences: a recent report published by RAND detailing a series of war games simulating various conflict situations, estimates that it would take Russian forces a maximum of 60 hours to reach the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga if they chose to attack.

More work to be done

There is no certain formula for successful deterrence, but given current Russian military capabilities, Western defence analysts argue that NATO would have to quickly deploy the equivalent of at least 6-7 BCTs to the Baltic states, of which half would have to be armoured, and perhaps as many as 13 BCTs overall to deter a Russian attack. While these forces are not currently available in eastern Europe, NATO is improving its capability to rapidly move forces across the continent by improving seaports, airports, railheads and storage capacity.

NATO is also developing a new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). The VJTF is a multinational brigade force set up on a rotational basis after the NATO summit in Wales in 2014. If called upon, the first elements of the VJTF should be available to deploy in two days, while the majority of the force should follow in less than seven days. The testing and development of the VJTF concept is continuing during 2016 with a series of exercises in eastern Europe. However, even with these improvements, concerns regarding follow-on forces in a major conflict situation remain. Since there is little to suggest that the US will fill the gap anytime soon, Europeans will need to up their game even more.

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