



Trump Troop Cut in Germany Continues Pattern of Alienating Allies

Robert Burns

June 19, 2020

In vowing to pull thousands of U.S. troops from Germany, President Trump is following a pattern of disruptive, sometimes punitive, moves against allies that have dismayed his fellow Republicans and cast doubt across the globe about the future of partnering with the United States.

Trump has consistently promised to bring American troops home, dismissing the conventional view that a far-flung U.S. military presence, while costly, pays off in the long run by ensuring stability for global trade.

“President Trump has had America’s alliances in his sights for a very long time,” said Mira Rapp-Hooper, a senior fellow on Asia policy at the Council on Foreign Relations and author of “Shields of the Republic: The Triumph and Peril of America’s Alliances.” She recalled newspaper ads Trump bought in 1987 to urge Washington to stop paying to defend countries such as Japan that can afford to protect themselves.

He also has argued for a faster withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Addressing newly minted officers graduating from West Point last Saturday, Trump said, “We are ending the era of endless wars. In its place is a renewed, clear-eyed focus on defending America’s vital interests. It is not the duty of U.S. troops to solve ancient conflicts in faraway lands that many people have never even heard of.”

Germany, long the centerpiece of U.S. defense strategy in Europe, has lately been the focus of Trump’s ire. His former national security adviser, John Bolton, writes in his new book that Trump wanted U.S. troops out of not just Germany but as many other countries as possible.

On Monday, in announcing that he would reduce the U.S. troop level in Germany to 25,000 from the current 34,500, Trump said the Germans had long shortchanged the United States on trade and defense, declaring that “until they pay” more for their own defense, he will reduce U.S. troop levels.

Twenty-two Republicans on the House Armed Services Committee fired back with a letter to Trump saying a reduced U.S. commitment to Europe’s defense would encourage Russian aggression and opportunism.

Removing thousands of U.S. troops from Germany could be a lengthy process, and if Democrat Joe Biden is elected in November, he might reverse Trump's decision. The former vice president has said he would act to strengthen U.S. alliances.

The Trump approach is welcomed by some who see declining value in the NATO alliance. Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow for defense and foreign policy at the libertarian Cato Institute, wrote in an essay last week for *The National Interest* that cutting U.S. troop levels in Germany carries little strategic risk.

"There is no totalitarian Soviet threat, and the Red Army is not poised to pour through the Fulda Gap in Germany and try to sweep to the Atlantic," Carpenter wrote, referring to the nightmare scenario of the Cold War era that prompted the United States to station more than 300,000 troops in Germany for a time. "Today's Russia is a pale shadow of the USSR in terms of population, economic output, and military power."

While Trump has repeatedly blasted Germany and others in NATO for spending too little on defense, he has taken a friendlier approach to Poland, which has lobbied for a bigger U.S. troop presence as a bulwark against potential Russian aggression. The right-wing Polish government flattered Trump by offering to pay to establish a "Fort Trump" as a permanent U.S. base, an idea that went nowhere.

Polish President Andrzej Duda is to visit Trump next week. Last year the United States agreed to increase its rotational military force in Poland by 1,000.

In targeting Germany, Trump cast his troop cut not as an improvement for U.S. national security but as economic punishment for Germany. He said the German economy benefits from spending by the U.S. troops based there. The Pentagon also has thousands of civilian employees in Germany.

This is the kind of antagonism toward allies that bothered Trump's first defense secretary, Jim Mattis, so much that he quit. At the time of his resignation in December 2018, Mattis was upset by Trump's sudden decision — later amended — to remove all U.S. troops from Syria, abandoning their Kurdish partners. But that was only the latest instance of what Mattis saw as Trump's disrespect for allies.

Trump more recently has created a rift with South Korea over sharing the cost of hosting the approximately 28,000 troops based there. Last year, the administration stunned Seoul by demanding a fivefold increase in South Korea's share of the cost, to \$5 billion, and the two sides remain at loggerheads.

In his book Bolton quotes Trump as telling aides that if Seoul refused to pay the \$5 billion, "Let's get out."

Rapp-Hooper, of the Council on Foreign Relations, said she sees the demand as a pretext for troop cuts.

"The quintupling request is so astronomical that it begs the question of how the administration came up with the number or how it could ever expect its ally to pay that much more," she said in

an interview. She suspects it was meant to signal Japan that it, too, will be asked to pay more to host U.S. troops.

“This is a particularly shocking alliance approach that defies the logic of international relations because of course the reason American troops are on the Korean peninsula is to deter and defend against threats from North Korea,” which includes threats to the U.S. homeland, Rapp-Hooper said.

In Congress, Republicans as well as Democrats have answered Trump’s Germany announcement caution verging upon alarm.

Sen. Chuck Grassley, an Iowa Republican, said in a floor speech Wednesday that although the U.S. troop presence is unpopular among some Germans, justifying “second thoughts” in Washington, it would be a mistake to decouple American security from that of decades-old allies in Europe.

“Since World War II, we have reluctantly accepted the lesson that our geography and goodwill alone cannot protect us from being dragged into other things around the globe, particularly conflicts,” he said.