

Pulling out of Germany: Trump Adjusts the Military Furniture

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August 1, 2020

One noisy theme in the Donald Trump Disruption Show in an otherwise chaotic assemblage of messages has remained fairly constant: winding back US troop commitments. The US has fought its complement of wars, bloodied, and bloodying. Time to up stakes and head home. It was a message that sold in 2016 across the aisles of politics, and it is one that continues to resonate. But the practice of it has proven murkier. Nothing this president does can be otherwise. The US military complex remains sprawling, overweight, and defiant. As a result, the military footprint has been not so much dissipated as readjusted.

President Trump's recent decision to move troops out of Germany is a case in point. Those wishing for a trimmer, less militarist imperium will be disappointed. The shifting of 11,900 US personnel out of the country is seemingly a matter of rearrangement and fitting. The imperium is merely adjusting the furniture.

US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper gave the decision a tactical dress. The redeployment would, contrary to critics, strengthen NATO, deter Russia and ready the US military for "a new era of great power competition." This realignment of "our forces in Europe" would "support our partners and stand up to military adversary behaviour."

Of the designated number, 6,400 will return to the US. These are intended for future redeployment in Eastern Europe and elsewhere while 5,600 are destined for Belgium, Italy and other NATO countries. Instead of coating the decision in the carefully chosen doublespeak of strategy, Trump was reliably cranky in justification. As he explained, the troops "are there to protect Germany, right? Germany's not paying for it. We don't want to be suckers any more. The United States has been taken advantage of for 25 years, both on trade and on the military. So we're reducing the force because they are not paying their bills."

This was something of a stretch – and a very elastic one at that. The gripe Trump and his circle have had since coming to office is that powers such as Germany simply do not spend enough on defence, while happy-go-lucky chauvinist states like Poland, do. In June last year, Trump suggested the possibility of moving US troops to Poland from Germany, while the Polish President Andrzej Duda felt "deeply justified to ensure that the US troops are left in Europe." US ambassador to Poland Georgette Mosbacher, forgetting her diplomatic posting, added a dash of

one-upmanship. “Poland meets its 2% of GDP spending obligation towards NATO. Germany does not. We would welcome American troops in Germany to come to Poland.”

In August 2019, then US ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell, very much the fly in the ointment of US-German relations, warned that some form of withdrawal, either total or partial, would take place unless an increase in defence spending took place. As he is reported to have told the DPA news agency, “It is actually offensive to assume that the US taxpayer must continue to pay to have 50,000 plus Americans in Germany, but the Germans get to spend their surplus on domestic programs.”

The current percentage of German military spending as a share of GDP is 1.5%. Washington continues to press for the threshold of 2%. Ironically enough, US troop redeployments will take place largely to countries with levels of expenditure even lower than Germany. Italy comes in at 1.2%; Belgium, a pinch under 1%. The military spenders in Poland will be disappointed.

Whatever the substance of the decision, such reorientations struck the security establishment on both sides of the Atlantic as something nearing treachery. When the president floated the idea of reducing the troop numbers last month, there were protesting squeals and calls of warning. The Big Bully parent was abandoning its adoptees and advertising that fact. “President Donald J. Trump’s order to withdraw nearly ten thousand troops from Germany betrays a close ally, undermines confidence in Washington, and makes Europe and the United States less safe,” suggested Philip Gordon of the Council of Foreign Relations. “By questioning the sanctity of the US defence guarantee in Europe, treating NATO as a protection racket, and unilaterally diminishing America’s ability to uphold that guarantee,” Gordon continues to fuss that, “Trump is effectively signaling that an attack on a NATO ally would not necessarily be met with a US response.” An imaginative reading, if ever there was one.

Various German politicians, weaned on the narrative that a Germany with a US garrison is far better than a Germany without, were also shaken. Norbert Röttgen of the Bundestag and chair of the German parliament’s foreign policy committee expressed his views through the Funke Media Group. He could see no “factual reason for the withdrawal” and doing so was “very regrettable.” Johann Wadephul, deputy chairman of the parliamentary caucus of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s centre-right Union bloc, was similarly unimpressed. The decision to remove such numbers of US troops from Germany without consulting NATO allies “shows once again that the Trump administration is neglecting basic leadership tasks.” Merkel’s transatlantic coordinator Peter Beyer was similarly aggrieved. “This is completely unacceptable, especially since nobody in Washington thought about informing its NATO ally Germany in advance.”

Their shock suggested the sinking of an idea: that the hegemon, the superpower, is obligated to consult those whose territory it chooses to use, whose grounds it decided to occupy or leave for vague reasons of security. Daddy should listen.

Emily Haber, Germany’s ambassador to Washington, is keen that should happen, sending out messages of sweet reassurance that US troops had “become neighbours, friends, partners, and friends while protecting transatlantic security and projecting American power and interests globally.”

Notwithstanding the inconsistencies in the move, the logic of garrisoning such a large number of troops in Germany has not struck some pundits as particularly sound. Being of the Cato Institute,

which does, from time to time, evoke a sensible sentiment with regards imperial overstretch, Ted Galen Carpenter assured opponents of Trump's decision that they "look at the calendar. It reads 2020, not 1950 or even 1989. There is no totalitarian threat, and the Red Army is not poised to pour through the Fulda Gap in Germany and try to sweep the Atlantic."

Exaggerating the Russian threat, however, is a long-standing tradition that has made funding military budgets and keeping US troops in place over the globe a fundamental, if fictional necessity. Not even Trump has succeeded in dousing that paranoid passion.