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Why Are American Troops Still Stationed In Europe?

REGENSBURG, GERMANY

—[Washington](#) has sharply reduced the number of American combat forces in Europe since the end of the Cold War, but a large U.S. military footprint remains. The Soviet “Evil Empire” has collapsed, Eastern Europe has switched sides, and America’s European allies now possess a collective GDP and population larger than the U.S. Why are American military personnel still stationed on the continent?



A U.S. soldier participates in a training exercise at the U.S. Army's Joint Multinational Readiness Center near Hohenfels, Germany. (Image credit: Getty Images via @daylife)

Regensburg once was a Roman garrison town and is a celebrated tourist site. More important for Americans, nearby sits the U.S. Army’s Hohenfels training facility.

Last week I participated in an Army-sponsored trip to Hohenfels. As always, spending time with American military personnel enhances my great respect for the Armed Services. From my time long (too long!) ago as an Air Force brat to now as a DC policy wonk I have found service members to be solid organizers, generous hosts, and impressive people.

At Hohenfels the Army trains not only American personnel but the armed forces of allied states, including the newer members of NATO. But it isn’t a NATO facility, an interesting anomaly. The training was extraordinarily sophisticated, preparing participants for irregular as well as regular conflict. In one of the “villages” that we visited—filled with people playing roles ranging from café owners to policemen—a truck bomb “exploded,” forcing the defending forces to respond as if they were in a combat situation. There even were local “journalists” taking pictures, which would later be “published” by media in the host “nation.”

The U.S. armed forces always will need to train. Doing so is an imperative for meeting objectives and reducing casualties in a range of operations. However, the objective of multilateral training is far less clear.

Assembling allies once was a means to achieve the end of security. Today

Washington collects “allies” as an end in itself—for instance, bringing into NATO new states with more strategic liabilities than assets. The Bush administration even pushed to include the country of Georgia, which started a war with Russia four years ago, a mad policy which would needlessly risk confrontation with a nuclear-armed power.

Related is the Pentagon’s new mantra of “partnership.” Explained Catherine Dale in a study for the Congressional Research Service: “Recent defense and national strategic guidance clearly conveys the view that partnership is good. But as a rule, it provides much less sense of what partnership is designed to achieve and how that protects U.S. interests; it does not clearly indicate how to prioritize among partnership activities; it does not assign specific roles and responsibilities for partnership across the U.S. government; and it does not indicate how to judge whether partnership is working.

The activities at Hohenfels raise two important questions which the next president and Congress will have to answer in a world of ever-growing budget pressure.

First, for what should American forces train? Eleven years of nation-building in Afghanistan for no worthwhile end—to make Kabul safe for the greedy, grasping Karzai clan?—hopefully has quelled Washington’s desire to embark upon similar adventures in the future. While war can sometimes be an ugly necessity, in recent years virtually none of America’s military missions have been “forced on” us, as some hawks like to argue. Rather, U.S. policy-makers have chosen to police the globe without much thought to costs and benefits.

The most important role for the U.S. armed forces in the future is to defend against potential hegemonic threats that no other state can deter. Washington policymakers should simply cross off of the potential target list countries like Syria and Sudan. If the Europeans or others want to step in, let them create the necessary military forces.

Second, who should American forces train? Although some nations share more of the financial cost than others, and U.S. troops learn as well as teach, the multinational training remains another burden on Washington. Decades after the end of World War II America still treats its allies as security dependents.

There is no doubt that militaries from friendly states learn much at Hohenfels (as well as through service with U.S. forces in the field elsewhere). In fact, American personnel were generous of their praise of other forces, such as the Slovenians. However, why should the American people care if the Slovenes have a better-trained military? With an active force of 7600 Slovenia is a nonfactor in Europe, and even more so in the global balance. That will not change, irrespective of the quality of Slovenia’s military.

A common response is that America gains a return on its “investment” through allied assistance to missions elsewhere. That is, most of the nations which have sent units to Hohenfels also have sent forces to Afghanistan and/or Iraq. Arguably it is cheaper to train, support, and deploy troops from such countries than to send Americans for occupation duty. For instance, last year while visiting Afghanistan I found Macedonians (from a military totaling 8000 personnel) manning the gates at Camp Eggers in Kabul.

But these are wars that Washington should not be fighting now or in the

future. Fixing failed states, nation-building, and ending foreign civil wars should be dropped from the American military's job description. Of course, it is wise to prepare for unexpected contingencies, but the Army should focus on the tasks most relevant to U.S. security.

Nor is there much will among Washington's friends to repeat Afghanistan or Iraq. European peoples are even less supportive than the American public of ongoing operations in the former. There is no chance of assistance for contingencies in Asia, where U.S. attention is shifting.

Moreover, virtually every European nation is reducing military outlays, which will reduce their ability to join Washington in any future conflict—including *in Europe*. Even the most important continental powers, France and Great Britain, are cutting force structures.

Hofenfels host Germany is doing the same. While Berlin promises that it will actually increase the number of personnel available for expeditionary duties, German military personnel privately express skepticism. Smaller European states are heading toward de facto disarmament, with little ability to support peace-keeping missions let alone engage in combat operations. Future large-scale coalition assistance anywhere is more likely to be a dream than a reality.

Which makes today's debate over U.S. military spending a bit surreal. American politicians insist that Washington must continue to dominate the globe, irrespective of threats or resources. Citizens of foreign nations which are busily disarming argue much the same.

For instance, also last week I met a couple of Dutch journalists who insisted that America should continue to defend everyone everywhere. Yet their nation has just 37,400 men under arms. Last year the Netherlands announced what the Institute for [International](#) Strategic Studies termed "significant reductions in all three services" and the Dutch defense minister requested that NATO "be more selective in future missions."

Today the U.S. is effectively bankrupt, but continues to write security checks which it cannot cover. America accounts for almost half of the world's military expenditures and provides defense guarantees to prosperous, populous allies throughout Asia and Europe. Moreover, U.S. forces wander the globe attempting to create democracy and stability ex nihilo. At the same time Washington props up unpopular dictatorships throughout the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. This strategy is unsustainable.

The U.S. should start acting as a true Great Power. Many events elsewhere interest and affect America, but not in any vital or important way. Rather than seeking to control everything and manipulate everyone overseas, Washington policymakers should calibrate response to importance, which in many cases would mean doing less or even nothing. Benign neglect often is the best foreign policy.

Along the way, the U.S. should cooperate with friendly states, like the Europeans, on projects of shared interest. But even then military cooperation should serve serious interests. There's no warrant for preserving an alliance when all of the original justifications have disappeared. Washington's objective should be to advance American security, not provide foreign charity.

Despite its many troubles, the U.S. is going to remain the world's most

powerful nation for years, indeed, decades, to come. However, America's global dominance will fade and Washington will find it increasingly difficult to impose its will on friends and adversaries alike. In this changing world the U.S. will need to better align national ambitions with available resources. Which means the American military commitment to and presence in Europe must continue to shrink.

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