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Europe's brigades remain a contentious issue

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Stars and Stripes

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HEIDELBERG, Germany — Just last year, Adm. James Stavridis, commander of U.S. European Command and NATO supreme allied commander, told Congress that keeping four U.S. Army combat brigades in Europe — instead of two — was “crucial” to the mission and national security interests.

The four brigades were necessary for deterring aggression and adventurism. They were needed to be closer to current battlefields and to prepare for the next one by building capacity, trust and influence with our closest allies, he said.

It was the same thing a succession of four-star generals with European commands had gone on record saying for five years.

Lawmakers and foreign policy experts had for years discounted these arguments, seeking to remove most U.S. troops from Europe and Asia.

“I understand Brussels is a very nice place. I’m sure Germany is very nice,” said Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies for the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. “But [the generals] don’t have a strategic rationale for being there, or not a good enough one.”

But the generals’ arguments have carried the day, for now. Where once the withdrawal of two brigades was a certainty, just one brigade will be sent home, and not until 2015.

On April 8, the Defense Department announced that one of the Germany-based “heavy” brigades — currently the 170th Infantry Brigade Combat Team based in Baumholder and now in Afghanistan; and the 172nd IBCT based in Grafenwöhr and Schweinfurt and expected to deploy to Afghanistan this summer — would be withdrawn from Germany and returned to the United States. Which brigade would leave, and from what location remains unknown.

The Army also has the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment in Vilseck, Germany, and the 173rd Airborne Brigade, with troops in Bamberg and Schweinfurt in Germany, and Vicenza, Italy.

The move would mean one-quarter of remaining U.S. combat soldiers, and one-half those with tanks and artillery — some 5,000 men — would be gone from Europe.

“It’s absolutely significant, no matter how you cut it,” said James McNaughton, U.S. Army Europe historian.

But perceptions of how significant varies.

“I think it signals that the U.S. expects to maintain a large military presence in Europe for the foreseeable future. And I think that’s unfortunate,” Preble said. “Don’t get me wrong, I was a Cold Warrior. Those guys were big and bad and scary. But now there’s no military rationale for having troops in Europe. None.”

Guy Ben-Ari, deputy director of the Defense Industrial Initiatives Group at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, also said the brigade’s removal sent an unfortunate message. But for the opposite reason.

“It’s an indication that the U.S. is not stepping up to provide any leadership and coordination,” Ben-Ari said. “In fact, it’s stepping away.”

“I don’t think the new global security environment is one that lends itself to a smaller U.S. presence. The U.S. is the No. 1 beneficiary of a more stable security environment for economic, political and geographical reasons,” he said.

Moving the brigade would weaken the NATO alliance, said Ståle Ulriksen, chair of the Security and Conflict Management Department at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs in Oslo. Norway, for instance, went to Afghanistan, like the other European nations, “to show solidarity and to stay on the good side of the U.S. — to be an ally,” he said.

Ulriksen said that “free-riding” on the U.S. had enabled Europeans to avoid devising their own coordinated defense structures and that they should “grow up and take responsibility.”

But he also said a European alliance was hard to imagine without the U.S. as leader.

“It’s a kind of a comfortable situation. You have a leader no one disputes,” he said. “What would be the alternative — the British? The French? The Germans?”

U.S. forces’ positioning is complex, having to do with international relations, questions of national identity, and huge amounts of money, he said. “And it’s political, of course, very, very political.”

The removal of one brigade appears to be a compromise.

Army transformation that began in 2003 under the Bush administration and a military re-basing decision planned to return two brigades, and pare what were 62,000 soldiers in Europe to 24,000. But the moves stalled in 2007, as combat deployments continued. Instead of drawing down, Army troop strength went up.

Between 1989 and 2003, the Army in Europe reduced its troops from about 213,000 to about 62,000, and closed about 70 percent of its facilities.

Now it’s going down again, as the Pentagon looks to cut costs and respond to a worldwide recession, a national debate about debt reduction

