

ISSUE BRIEF

Countering Russian Aggression in Eastern Europe

Leveraging US Rotational Forces

JUNE 2016 JONATHAN P. DUNNE

The past decade has witnessed a marked increase in Russian aggression and assertiveness. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Ukraine), and the recent Russian military intervention in the Syrian civil war, along with Russian provocations against NATO members and partner nations, are clear examples of this trend. Furthermore, the myriad of Russian cyber-attacks,¹ air space violations,² submarine infiltrations,³ and arctic initiatives,⁴ are designed, in part, to demonstrate the vulnerability of certain Western nations and the lack of strategic agility on the part of NATO.⁵

Many Eastern European nations have recognized this disturbing and fundamental change in the European security environment and are responding both nationally and multilaterally. The Baltic States, for example, have increased their defense spending, bolstered and accelerated their military modernization programs, and, in the case

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- 1 "Cyber Threats to the Nordic Region," Fire Eye: Security Reimagined, May 2015, <https://www.fireeye.com/content/dam/fireeye-www/global/en/current-threats/pdfs/rpt-nordic-threat-landscape.pdf>, accessed December 18, 2015.
- 2 Ian Kearns, "Avoiding War in Europe: The Risks from NATO-Russian Close Military Encounters," *Arms Control Today*, November 2015.
- 3 Armin Rosen, "US Admiral: Russia's Submarine Activity in the North Atlantic is at Cold War levels - and We Don't Know Why," *Business Insider: Australia*, February 6, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com.au/russias-submarine-activity-in-the-north-atlantic-is-at-cold-war-levels-2016-2>, accessed February 21, 2016.
- 4 Heather A. Conley and Caroline Rohloff, *The New Ice Curtain: Russia's Strategic Reach to the Arctic*, Center of Strategic and International Studies, August 2015.
- 5 Justyna Gotkowska, "Russia's Game in the Baltic Region: A Polish Perspective," European Council on Foreign Relations, December 16, 2014, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_russias_game_in_the_baltic_sea_region_a_polish_perspective381, accessed October 29, 2015.

Table 1. Allocations for European Reassurance Initiative Categories (in millions of USD)

Category	FY15 Enacted	FY16 Enacted	FY17 Requested
Increased Presence	423.1	471.4	1049.8
Exercises and Training	40.6	108.4	163.1
Improved Infrastructure	196.5	89.1	217.4
Enhanced Prepositioning	136.1	57.8	1903.9
Building Partner Capacity	13.7	62.6	85.5
TOTAL	810*	798.3**	3,419.7

Source: *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Request*.

* *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Request*, op. cit. "The Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015 (PL 113-235) provided \$175 million in the ERI transfer fund to support the Governments of Ukraine, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia."

** *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Request*, op. cit. "The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2016 (PL 114-113) provided an additional \$250 million to support the Government of Ukraine [not shown above]."

of Lithuania, have introduced conscription to quickly build more density in its force pool.⁶ On the other side of the Baltic Sea, the Nordic nations have deepened their bilateral and regional defense cooperation in a bid to respond to Russian assertiveness in the broader region.⁷ Poland's response to Russian aggression, measured in military spending increases, is arguably unprecedented in post-Cold War Europe.⁸

The United States, acknowledging this tenuous situation in Eastern Europe, and, more so, Russia's challenge to NATO's credibility and solidarity, has taken notice, as well. In early February 2016, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter rolled out the department's most recent budget proposal, which includes a four-fold increase in spending for the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) from roughly \$800 million to \$3.4 billion

annually. Specifically, it pledges substantial increases in the American presence in Europe to reassure NATO members and deter Russian aggression against US allies on the continent.⁹ Of note, ERI funding is relatively permanent, suggesting a sustained commitment by the United States.¹⁰

The *Defense Budget Overview* for Fiscal Year 2017 provides context to the announced ERI funding increases, as summarized in table 1.¹¹ Sharp increases

6 Piotr Szymański, "Between continuation and adaptation: The Baltic states' security policy and armed forces," *OSW Commentary*, November 23, 2015, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2015-11-24/between-continuation-and-adaptation-baltic-states-security>, accessed March 25, 2016.

7 Jordan Shilton, "Nordic countries sign defence cooperation agreement aimed at Russia," *International Committee of the Fourth International*, April 16, 2015, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/04/16/nord-a16.html>, accessed March 23, 2016.

8 Matthew Day, "Poland increases military spending in response to Russia's belligerence," *Telegraph*, March 28, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/11641852/Poland-increases-military-spending-in-response-to-Russias-belligerence.html>, accessed March 28, 2016.

9 "Remarks by Secretary Carter on the Budget at the Economic Club of Washington, D.C.," US Department of Defense, February 2, 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/648901/remarks-by-secretary-carter-on-the-budget-at-the-economic-club-of-washington-dc>, accessed February 10, 2016.

10 Lisa Sawyer Samp and Mark F. Cancian, "The European Reassurance Initiative," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 9, 2016, <http://csis.org/publication/european-reassurance-initiative>, accessed February 29, 2016. "The fact that ERI is funded in OCO represents an obstacle, but a minor one. In theory, OCO as a funding stream could go away as the United States winds down its overseas wars. OCO does not, therefore, have the same permanence that funding in the base budget would. However, with an expanding war in Iraq against ISIL and longer-term commitments recently made in Afghanistan, OCO appears to have a long future. Further, ERI has strong bipartisan support, so it is unlikely that there will be an effort to eliminate or reduce it within the foreseeable future."

11 Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) Chief Financial Officer, *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Request*, Figure 7.6 Allocations for European Reassurance Initiative Categories,

in combined exercises, training, and capacity-building efforts will be coupled with notable equipment posturing investment and associated infrastructure upgrades.

In late February, General Philip Breedlove, commander of the United States European Command (EUCOM), offered his “Posture Statement,” which provided further insight into his intentions to bolster regional defense and deterrence in Europe’s East.¹² In addition to expanding its combined exercise program, EUCOM will leverage ERI to fund an additional armored brigade combat team within the theater, as well as bolster its European Activity Sets (for training of regionally aligned forces) and Army Preposition Stocks (to sustain reinforcements as required in times of war or conflict).

To be clear, ERI authorizations and EUCOM’s missions, activities, programs, and exercises are predominantly all devised based on a *rotational* force model. While many argue for *permanent* force structure,¹³ this paper outlines a *conceptual approach to better understand the utility of rotational forces*. Ultimately, this issue brief offers practical recommendations that *a US rotational force construct can best be leveraged in support of Eastern European partners’ national and regional defense planning efforts*.

The Case Against Permanent Basing of US Forces in Eastern Europe

As a starting point for this argument, three indisputable geopolitical facts are offered. Taken individually, none of these are novel. Collectively, however, they frame

the context that dispels the political viability of increasing permanently based forces in Europe.

- First, the *socio-economic drivers that fueled the reduction of the US permanent presence in Europe will continue to outweigh contemporary security concerns*. Since the end of the Cold War, US force structure in Europe has been reduced by over 75 percent, and 85 percent of the bases or training areas once used by US forces have since been turned back over to European host nations.¹⁴ This two-decade-old socio-economic dynamic simply will not be overturned, recent Russian aggression aside. Politically, there is no appetite in either Europe or the United States to replicate US basing and force structure in Eastern Europe. The image

of mass US military formations operating from Cold-War like fortresses is viewed by most to be socially disruptive; for the rest, such an approach is seen as fiscally impracticable.

- Further, *the United States will continue to face a myriad of global security threats that prohibit a large standing commitment of US forces to Europe*. The United States contends with challenges from the rise of China, to the ongoing campaign in the Middle East and emerging threats from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, as well as a myriad of other global security

concerns. While it can be debated whether these security threats are more or less consequential than the increasing aggression of Russia, undeniably, all of these security dynamics exist; they will continue to capture the attention of US decision-makers and call for a significant commitment US security and fiscal resources for the foreseeable future.

- Finally, *introducing significant permanently based forces (conventional and strategic) in the region would intensify strategic tension, exacerbate deterrence efforts, and increase the likelihood of strategic miscalculations*. The permanent basing of significant US offensive capabilities within close

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February 2016, 7-7, http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2017/FY2017_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf.

12 United States European Command, “US European Command Posture Statement 2016: Posture Statement of General Philip Breedlove, Commander US European Command,” February 25, 2016, <http://www.eucom.mil/media-library/article/35164/u-s-european-command-posture-statement-2016>, accessed February 28, 2016.

13 John R. Schindler, “Welcome to Cold War 2.0: The risk of the Kremlin rolling the dice against NATO is real,” *Observer*, February 15, 2016, <http://observer.com/2016/02/welcome-to-cold-war-2-0/>, accessed February 29, 2016.

14 Luke Coffey, “Keeping America Safe: Why US Bases in Europe Remain Vital,” The Heritage Foundation, http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2012/pdf/SR111.pdf, accessed December 1, 2015.

proximity of the Russian border will disrupt the regional military balance, fuel further military posturing and competition, and ultimately serve as a potential catalyst for the very thing NATO is hoping to prevent—a systems-vs-systems competition that invites an inadvertent NATO Article 5 breach in Eastern Europe. Introducing Cold War posture approaches in the Baltics and Nordic region undercuts our long-term strategy to retain stability in the post-Cold War era.

That said, with waning Western deterrence relative to the looming Russian threat, how can European partners constructively optimize US *rotational* forces to bolster long-term collective defense? If approached purposefully, **a regional defense strategy that constructively integrates US rotational forces can effectively bolster military modernization efforts, sharpen regional deterrence efforts, and, as needed, fortify regional reinforcement efforts with an efficacy and efficiency that permanent basing of US forces fails to provide.**

Four Force Characteristics for a Rotational Force Employment Concept

By definition, rotational forces are designated to support theater security cooperation efforts for a finite period of time, before “rotating” to another assignment. To expand the rotational force definition, four inherent characteristics for the proposed rotational forces must be achieved to enable partner nations’ modernization, deterrence, and reinforcement.

- First, *the rotational force must be forward deployed and expeditionary in nature.* While rotational forces staged in the United States for employment in Eastern Europe offer an element of focus, the fact that they are not forward deployed compromises their sustained presence, and, ultimately, their viability as a regional catalyst and their deterrence credibility. In addition to being forward-deployed in theater, the rotational force must be inherently expeditionary; it cannot be absorbed into bases and operate in a restricted, confined manner. Rotational forces that are able to operate in austere environments can reduce tactical predictability

and achieve operational positional advantage without crossing political thresholds.

- Second, *a rotational plan must be resourced to achieve a sustained presence.* Breaks between force deployments prevent a consistent approach to capacity building, expose deterrence gaps that are vulnerable to exploitation, and hinder the introduction and sustainment of forces responding to crises or contingencies. In short, episodic presence introduces strategic risk.
- Third, *rotational forces and properly scoped permanent forces are complementary.* Small, discrete pockets of permanently based forces are critical enablers to optimizing rotational force strategy. Permanently based facilitators serve as catalysts for reception, integration, employment, and sustainment of rotational forces. Further, risks linked to the assessment and advancement of institutional capacity-building initiatives (discussed in detail below) can be mitigated with “permanently based oversight.” As such, this issue brief’s broader argument does not call for the elimination of US permanent presence; in fact, a rotational force strategy is dependent upon keenly scoped permanently based enablers.
 - Finally, *a rotational force construct must be integrated within a combined construct.* Regional partners must show a regional commitment if the United States will be expected politically and militarily to commit to a rotational force strategic approach. The United States has a vested interest in Eastern European matters, however, regional partners must demonstrate a shared commitment, in concept and in resources, toward this collective, nuanced partnership.

A creative and synchronized approach to rotational forces can generate significant military advantage.

Four Benefits of Rotational Forces

A creative and synchronized approach to rotational forces can generate significant military advantage.

- First, *rotational forces allow for “reinforcement rehearsals.”* Aspects of strategic logistics (such as force mobilization and strategic lift) and also operational logistics (such as force closure, arrival and assembly, intra-theater lift, theater distribution,



US, Finnish, and UK Royal Marines gather to embark on HMS Ocean (L 12) during a Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) multinational NATO exercise. *Photo credit: US Naval Forces Europe-Africa.*

sustainment, reconstitution, and redeployment) are complex activities that are vitally important to NATO reinforcement concepts. A regional strategy that integrates the deployment, employment, and redeployment of rotational forces allows for these critical functions of “reinforcement logistics” to be routinely exercised, particularly if these efforts are treated not as administrative movements but as force generation exercises and operations. Permanently based forces are static and predictable; they do not lend themselves to rehearsals for regional reinforcement. Introduction of rotational forces, varying in size, scope, location, and duration, can produce a healthy change in force presence and force posture while allowing for the exercise of vitally important skills.

- Second, *rotational force deployments and employment can generate appropriate infrastructure upgrades.* To enable the routine deployment, sustainable employment, and efficient redeployment of rotational forces,

specific infrastructure upgrades are necessary within the region. Adding resiliency, redundancy, and throughput to airfields and seaports, and expanding the capacity and distribution of theater stores represent appropriate expenditures. Fiscal commitments to favorably shape mobility and counter-mobility efforts are sound. Attempts to bolster military and broader security command and control efforts are to be commended. Infrastructure upgrades that deviate from campaigning efforts to instead inform robust life support initiatives often associated with standing garrisons should be resisted.

- Third, *rotational forces enable “dynamic defense posturing.”* Posture is a function of forward-deployed forces, prepositioned stocks and stores, and established agreements (political and military) that allow for the array of military capability across an operating area. While permanent forces represent a firm posturing commitment, they are fixed geographically to “main operating

bases.” Further, as permanently based forces are structurally rigid, significant modifications to that force configuration are surprisingly consequential undertakings. Rotational forces are not fixed, however, they are free—permitted to physically operate on exterior lines and capable of being designed in function and form to fulfill evolving requirements. Whether they are designed to enable partner nation capacity or support a multi-national deterrence/reinforcement effort, rotational forces can be altered to provide necessary niche capabilities.

- Finally, *rotational forces can serve as a “regional military modernization catalyst.”* Broadly speaking, whether they are linked to advancement of tactical capabilities, growth of operational proficiency, or development of defense institutions, meaningful partnerships with US forces can promote these developments. As opposed to the fixed structure of a permanently based force, the relative agility of rotational forces and their niche capabilities can be brought forward for finite periods of time to ignite a host nation’s or regional force’s designed advancement.

What Could Go Wrong? Four Inherent Risks

The matured integration of US rotational forces to advance Eastern European modernization, regional deterrence, or a reinforcement of the Baltic region is not absent of risk. In fact, four hazard areas exist that require detailed examination and deliberation.

- First, *rotational forces can be politically tenuous and fuel strategic ambiguity.* Many will attest that the reduction of US permanent forces from Europe over the past two-plus decades has been a healthy social and political dynamic. To further develop this point, some Americans and Europeans alike viewed the Cold War permanent footprint as an undesirable beacon of United States’ imperialism, whether justified or not.¹⁵ That being said, permanent

forces are inherently stable and enduring—it requires a formal, durable political agreement among governments. Rotational Forces—even those with seemingly sustained funding such as ERI—are inherently finite commitments. Along the political spectrum, rotational forces represent a non-enduring political commitment between two nations. This real or perceived absence of political will potentially reduces commitment among allies and perhaps signals an inadequate deterrence strategy to our adversaries.

- Second, *challenges to long-term capacity-building efforts can be exacerbated by a rotational force construct.* While this paper argues that capacity-building gains can be better realized through rotational forces, there are risks to this approach. Capacity building is often dependent upon individual or small-unit trust . . . a bond that requires time and energy to establish. Rotational forces terminate those interpersonal relationships (prematurely) and require time and energy to generate anew. Further, proper assessment of capacity building requires local practical experience as well as context-informed knowledge of the partner force. Transitions between rotational forces compound the issue of experience and knowledge.
- Third, *(expeditionary) rotational forces require “different” force protection measures.* When considered against the foil of permanent basing, the force protection requirements of rotational forces are significantly disparate. Operationally, rotational forces are not tied to fortified bases, but instead operate along exterior lines, sustained by dispersed caches and flexible supply chains. As such, the operational force protection gains they achieve by being more mobile and less predictable, admittedly, introduce elements of tactical risk, as the force is not protected by infrastructure and is potentially exposed. This dynamic cannot be ignored, as “unnecessary” attrition to a US force can generate social and political ramifications that undermine a rotational force strategy.
- Finally, *a rotational force employment strategy requires modified rules of engagement.* Rules of engagement govern the application of force, lethal and non-lethal. While undoubtedly US forces deploy into operating areas with a clear understanding of their individual and collective rights to apply force within the framework of

15 Chalmers Johnson, “America’s Empire of Bases,” Global Policy Forum, January 2004, <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/153/26119.html>, accessed 25 Feb 2016; Tom Englehardt, “America’s Empire of Bases (Updated Edition),” *Huffington Post*, December 17, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-engelhardt/americas-empire-of-bases-_b_8827598.html, accessed February 25, 2016; David Vine, “America Has Way Too Many Overseas Bases,” *War is Boring*, September 15, 2015, <http://warisboring.com/articles/americas-empire-of-overseas-military-bases-do-not-make-us-safer/>, accessed February 25, 2016.



Lithuanian Special Forces members lie in formation during a Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) 2012 amphibious operation exercise. *Photo credit: US Navy.*

competent authorities, during steady-state operations, those rules are generally limited to self-defense and/or defense of critical equipment, crucial infrastructure, and national interests. The rules of engagement for rotational forces—if, in fact, they are genuinely designed to not only build capacity *but credibly contribute to deterrence and regional reinforcement*—require on-scene commanders with the authority to make agile adjustments based on rapidly changing dynamics on the ground. For regional security partners, this is an important consideration and fundamental to the credibility of partnered/combined security and deterrence approaches.

Recommendations

To enhance future deliberations regarding specific rotational force arrangement, regional partners in Eastern Europe should consider the following initiatives:

- First, *host nation security defense strategies and military strategies must reflect rotational*

force requirements. This paper argues that rotational forces bolster partner nation military modernization, sharpen regional deterrence, and add credibility to regional reinforcement. Partner nations' strategic documents should communicate how they desire rotational forces to contribute meaningfully to those ends. Of note, it is partnered nations' coherent, measured, long-range rotational force concepts that will generate more predictable and sustained sourcing of US rotational forces. Further, the concept should inform collective resourcing and logistics, recognizing that rotational force strategies require agile host nation support and theater logistics. Ultimately, allied nations that generate and commit to coherent defense strategies are more likely to garner the support of sustained US rotational force augmentation.

- Next, *organic to the effort above, force protection initiatives must be reassessed.* While discrete, dispersed rotational forces lessen operational level risk to mission, dynamic provisions of tactical-level

protection of the force are required. Procedures for intelligence sharing, measures of discrete, layered host nation security, and the provision of appropriate authorities (see below) are necessary criteria. While these force protection efforts must be cognizant of fiscal constraints and must seek to minimize social disruption to local populations, it is not an issue that can be ignored. Simply put, *a host nation can bolster its chances of gaining a commitment of sustained US rotation force presence if that nation's strategy offers a plausible, flexible plan for protection.*

- Further, *collective arrangements for regional cooperation must emerge.* Shepherded by the US, regional dialogue among the Nordic and Baltic nations must continue to mature. Host nation capacity-building efforts (supported by US rotational forces) directly impact regional deterrence and regional reinforcement efforts, and, as such, rotational force efforts should be synchronized. Combined training, theater infrastructure, and regional procurement, coordinated among Eastern European partners and supported by a rotational force, can achieve optimized efficiencies.
- Finally, *matured, dynamic rules of engagement must be realized.* While this is a delicate issue, if a rotational force strategy is adopted, in part, to bolster regional deterrence and enable reinforcement of Eastern Europe in times of extremis, that rotational force must be credible. That credibility hinges upon a rules-of-engagement

construct that, under proper authority, allows for the application of proportional force to mitigate a threat.

Conclusion

With Russia looming, Eastern Europe appropriately seeks greater NATO presence and viability. While NATO's resolve to bolster Eastern European modernization efforts, improve regional deterrence, and quickly reinforce in order to counter Russian aggression is debatable, the fact remains that the ERI represents a call to action for Eastern European allies. There is a limited opportunity to recognize the ERI for what it is—a significant US effort to enhance Eastern European security—*through the use of a rotational force construct.* The ability of individual nations to embrace the operational benefits of rotational forces toward capacity building, deterrence, and reinforcement efforts, while mitigating their sustainment and force protection risks, is important. More so, a regional strategy that eliminates redundancies and otherwise promotes rotational force efficiencies, is desirable. The toil of the post-Cold War era has produced a degree of peace and stability in Eastern Europe that should be recognized and defended; a collective approach that leverages US rotational forces can help safeguard that hard-earned victory.

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