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Defender 2020-Europe Military Exercise, Historical (REFORGER) Exercises, and U.S. Force Posture in Europe

On October 7, 2019, the U.S. Army announced it would conduct the largest U.S.-based exercise of forces deploying to Europe in the past 25 years: Defender 2020-Europe. While some have compared it to annual Cold War-era REFORGER military exercises, the Army suggests that while similar, Defender 2020-Europe will be a more complex exercise than historical REFORGER exercises in terms of logistics, multinational command and control, and multidomain operations.

Defender 2020-Europe

From a military standpoint, in the event of a major conflict on the European continent, present force levels, including units in Europe as part of the "heel-to-toe" rotations, could prove to be insufficient to defend U.S. and allied interests. In that scenario, the United States may choose to flow significant additional forces across the Atlantic, an undertaking that would be complex under optimal circumstances, and exponentially more so under conditions of war, when an adversary might seek to actively prevent the arrival of U.S. forces and equipment ("anti-access/area denial"). Some officials are concerned that the United States' ability to move equipment in timely fashion, in particular heavy tanks and fighting vehicles, from U.S. bases to the ports from which the equipment is shipped requires additional emphasis. Defender-2020 is intended to exercise and test such expeditionary deployment capabilities, much as REFORGER did in past eras.

What Was REFORGER?

REFORGER—*RE*turn of *FOR*ces to *GER*many—was a series of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) annual military exercises conducted from the late 1960s to early 1990s to validate the ability of NATO allies to rapidly deploy forces to Europe to reinforce NATO positions on the continent and to demonstrate Western commitment to defend against Warsaw Pact aggression.

U.S. Military in Europe During the Cold War

While approximately 74,000 U.S. military personnel are stationed in Europe today, at the height of the Cold War, more than 400,000 U.S. military personnel were stationed on the European continent. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS):

> In the late 1980s, the United States maintained approximately 340,000 permanently stationed military personnel in Europe to deter the conventional threat that the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact forces posed to West Germany and Western Europe. Of that, U.S. Army forces represented approximately 193,000 soldiers organized under two corps (each composed of an armored division, an infantry division, and an armored cavalry brigade) in addition to three independent combat brigades and numerous enabler and support units. Apart from permanent-stationed forces, the United States maintained large stockpiles of prepositioned equipment in Western Europe—enough for several divisions and support units—to allow forces based elsewhere to rapidly reinforce the continent in the event of conflict.

The Evolution of REFORGER

According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO):

> REFORGER'S history can be traced to the 1967 Tripartite Agreement between the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Federal Republic of Germany. The agreement allowed the United States to bring back to the United States the headquarters and two brigades of the 24th Mechanized Infantry Division, leaving only one brigade of that division in Europe. To compensate for this reduction in troop strength, the agreement required that U.S. forces returning to the United States be held in a high state of readiness to ensure their capability to return rapidly to Europe in a crisis. The agreement also stipulated that the 24th Mechanized Infantry Division return the two U.S.-based brigades annually to Germany, draw prepositioned equipment, link up with the forward-deployed brigade, and then participate in a field training exercise (FTX).

REFORGER was conducted in three phases:

(1) Deployment. Tested procedures for receiving, equipping, and transporting REFORGER units to assembly areas for tactical employment and also evaluated the condition of prepositioned equipment.

(2) REFORGER Follow-On Exercise. Provided combined arms training to REFORGER forces and oriented units deployed from the United States with the European environment, as well as their missions in the defense of Europe.

(3) Redeployment. Cleaned equipment, returned it to storage, and redeploy forces back to the United States.

While REFORGER initially enjoyed public support, as the exercise grew over the years in terms of numbers of troops and quantities of equipment, and overall exercise scope,

public opposition in Europe over the disruptive nature of the two-month or longer exercise and the damage it caused to the environment became more pronounced. In addition, the costs associated with airlift, sealift, port handling, and inland transportation of troops and equipment, as well as payments to European governments and citizens for maneuver damage, became more of a consideration. Based in part on the aforementioned concerns, starting in 1989, when the U.S. decided to cancel REFORGER and replace it with a smaller command post exercise, REFORGER began evolving to more of a computer simulation-based command post exercise that involved fewer troops, less equipment, and not as much maneuver. As the threat from the Warsaw Pact began to diminish in the early 1990s, REFORGER exercises were scaled back, with the last REFORGER exercise being held in 1993.

From 1993 to 2014

For nearly 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, several strategic assumptions guided U.S. policy:

- Europe could be stable, whole, and free;
- Russia could be a constructive partner in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture; and
- particularly prior to September 11, 2001, threats posed by terrorism and migration from the Middle East/North Africa region were limited.

These assumptions led to the withdrawal of the bulk of forward-deployed U.S. troops in the European theater. USEUCOM subsequently focused on nonwarfighting missions—some of them outside of NATO's traditional area of operations. Such missions included building the security capacity and capability of former Soviet bloc states; prosecuting "crisis management" operations in the Balkans; and logistically supporting U.S. Central Command and U.S. Africa Command by providing, in particular, critical medical evacuation facilities using U.S. bases in Germany.

Over the past 25 years, decisions regarding U.S. basing and posture in the European theater largely reflected these assumptions. The bulk of U.S. forces in Europe were withdrawn (as of FY2018, approximately 74,000 military service members were assigned and 20,000 civilians were authorized to USEUCOM and its subordinate commands). Many bases and outposts were either consolidated or closed. Nevertheless, two Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) were retained (in Italy and Germany), as were some naval bases, particularly those along NATO's southern flank, and a number of air bases that were deemed critical for supporting operations in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.

USEUCOM's Current Geopolitical Challenges

Events in recent years, particularly since 2014, have tested, if not undermined, the strategic assumptions underpinning USEUCOM's posture. To Europe's east, Russia annexed Crimea, began a proxy war in Eastern Ukraine, and is modernizing its conventional and nonconventional forces. Russia also increased its military activities in Europe's high north, particularly through reportedly adding nuclear-capable missiles to Kaliningrad (a Russian territory on the Baltic Sea that is not contiguous with Russia itself), enhancing its air patrolling activities close to other states' airspace, and enhancing its naval presence in the Baltic Sea, the Arctic Ocean, and the North Sea. Taken together, these moves have heightened some congressional concerns about Russian aggression and its implications for NATO territories, particularly among Central and Eastern European NATO allies.

The European Deterrence Initiative and Operation Atlantic Resolve

In response, the United States and its NATO allies have undertaken a number of initiatives to underscore NATO's collective defense agreements, intended to assure allies of their own security while simultaneously deterring Russian aggression. The United States has bolstered security in Central and Eastern Europe with an increased rotational military presence, additional exercises and training with allies and partners, improved infrastructure to allow greater responsiveness, enhanced prepositioning of U.S. equipment, and intensified efforts to build partner capacity for newer NATO members and other non-NATO countries.

The European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), launched in 2014 (originally called the European Reassurance Initiative), an Overseas Contingency Operations set of programs in the U.S. defense budget, is the key means of building partner capacity. U.S. military operational activities of EDI are executed as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve (OAR). Approximately 6,000 U.S. military personnel are involved in OAR at any given time, with units typically operating in the region under a rotational nine-month deployment.

As part of OAR, DOD has also increased its rotations of temporary forces in and out of USEUCOM to assure allies of the United States' commitment to their security. Dubbed "heel-to-toe" rotations, air, ground and naval assets are deployed from the United States to conduct exercises with NATO allies for several months; they are then immediately replaced by other like units. U.S. ground forces have been largely stationed in Poland, with elements also conducting training and exercises in the Baltic States, Bulgaria, Romania, and Germany. This rotation ensures that there are at least three Brigade Combat Teams in Europe at all times.

Many observers contend these "heel-to-toe" rotations have usefully required military units in the continental United States to routinely test their ability to deploy to other theaters and exercise critical logistics and mobility capabilities. After nearly 20 years of expeditionary operations in the Middle East region, the skills and capabilities necessary to mass U.S. forces onto the European continent and transit them to the front lines have arguably atrophied. Heel-to-toe rotations have allowed U.S. forces to develop those skills while simultaneously identifying and developing solutions to logistical issues in Eastern Europe that might slow down a U.S./NATO response to a crisis.

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