



Security Policy Working Paper, No. 18/2018

Reliability beyond Trump Tweets

The US military contribution in Europe

by *Philipp Lange*

“Actions speak louder than words.” Given the volatile and irritating rhetoric of US President Donald Trump, it is currently difficult to believe in this American saying. Among his topics are the division of the West, the withdrawal of the United States as a guarantor of security in Europe and the decline of the American era. An audit of the costs incurred by the stationing of US troops in Germany, with which the White House has recently commissioned the Pentagon, seems to have contributed to these irritations, too. All this constantly gives rise to doubts about the Alliance solidarity of the US Administration and the fulfilment of its obligations within the NATO framework. When taking a closer look at the US military commitment in Europe, it becomes clear, however, that there has been no real break since Trump succeeded Obama in office. The rationale behind the present US commitment in Europe is rather a consequence of long-term strategic decisions in times of limited resources, also for the Americans.

In NATO’s discussions about the contributions of the individual members and of their substantial relevance to the Alliance, the debate is often limited to three parameters: “Capabilities, Contribution and Cash”. Thus, the value of a state’s commitment to the Alliance does not consist in rhetoric smokescreens but in its apparent readiness to comply with the NATO capability goals, to make tangible contributions to the operations and to provide appropriate financial means for defence purposes – especially with respect to the latter, the “two-percent debate” is currently omnipresent in Brussels.

Nevertheless, regarding the perception of the role of the US in the Alliance, these “3 Cs” are eclipsed by a hitherto less relevant aspect which can be called “communication”: After 17 years of strenuous fighting against terrorism and of interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US seem to move away from the image as a shaper of the global order, at least rhetorically. Security circles increasingly speak of the symptoms of a disintegrating empire that, in material and ideological terms, is no longer prepared to defend its fringes. The impression given is that of withdrawal and of termination of the Western (military) cohesion. The factual situation, however, paints a different picture: Not only does the United States comply with its military obligations towards Europe and is entirely capable of providing the announced military capabilities, but it has even constantly continued and increased its activities to reassure the (East) European allies - and this has also been going on under President Trump.

Crimean Crisis and European Reassurance

After there had been plans to give a new impetus to the relations between Russia and the United States under President Obama, these relations actually reached a low since the end of the Cold War as a result of the annexation of Crimea by Russia. The Obama administration was thus faced with several problems. Given the consistent and gradual reduction of US troop numbers in Europe in previous years, the only substantial combat units remaining on the continent in spring 2014 were two light infantry brigades, consisting of a motorized infantry regiment in Bavaria with 3,900 troops and a highly mobile airborne infantry force with

4,400 troops, distributed across Italy and Bavaria,¹ as well as an army aviation unit which was also stationed in Bavaria. The threat posed to Ukraine's territorial integrity and the loss of parts of Ukraine did not pose a risk to US vital geostrategic interests that would have justified robust military commitment. At the same time, Washington still needed Moscow as a partner on the global stage, in particular in order to protect the Iran nuclear deal. In the crisis year of 2014, the US force posture in Europe might have risen the question whether it would have been able to successfully carry out collective Alliance defence against an opponent at eye level. In effect, at the time of the invasion of Crimea, the Americans – let alone the Europeans – were no longer able to win a comprehensive battle at sea, on land and in the air with a command structure operational in wartime. The central question arose what kind of support was to be expected from the United States now. Obama had to find a way to deal with this complex blend of varying interests.

Washington immediately developed the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) which was intended to ensure NATO's security and territorial integrity in Europe. The ERI was a comprehensive package of financial aids aimed at increasing the operational readiness of the US troops and their readiness to take defensive action together with their allies in Europe. However, the question now was to what extent US forces were to be employed in Europe and what capabilities were to be exploited. Were additional forces required and, if so, how should they be designed? The outcome of these considerations was a military-strategic triad, the central points of which are still valid today: First of all, small forward "trip wire forces" are deployed in the Eastern member states of the Alliance. These forces send a political signal of unity to Russia but also to the Alliance members in order to reassure them. In the event that they are attacked, the whole Alliance, including the three NATO nuclear powers would be involved and would take joint action against the aggressor. In a real-case scenario, the loss of these units could also be compensated for relatively quickly. Second, rapid and mobile reaction forces are generated which are capable of supporting the forward units in case of a crisis. Finally, in a real-case scenario, the Alliance would mobilize massive follow-on forces to restore its territorial integrity.

Based on this approach, the US launched Operation *Atlantic Resolve* in 2014 as part of Obama's European Reassurance Initiative. What is interesting in this context is that *Atlantic Resolve* is not a NATO operation but a reinforcement measure carried out on a bilateral basis with the respective Eastern European allies. This operation, which has now reached its fourth year of existence, continues to follow five guidelines, each building on the previous one: The first one is the increased presence of military forces in Europe, the second is intensified exercises and training to enhance operational readiness and interoperability among the partners. The third one is strategic forward-basing of equipment and heavy machinery (by which the activities of the armed forces on site and, in the event of a crisis, the reaction forces, too, can be supported), the fourth one improved infrastructure to support the increased presence. The fifth one is a capability build-up of the partner nations, with the objective of providing assistance for self-help and to increase interoperability with US forces.

Capabilities, Contribution and Cash: The US commitment in Europe under Trump

Since Donald Trump has taken over as President, the US contribution to Alliance solidarity has not noticeably decreased if one uses the three "Cs" as a yardstick. Planned capabilities, the military contribution and the defence expenditure paint a very positive picture in this context. Notwithstanding all changes and breaks on the global stage caused by Trump since the end of 2016, an almost contradictory continuity can be identified with regard to military commitment in Europe. The reason for this is that the fundamental military strategic orientation of the United States with regard to Europe does not come from the Trump period but originated in the era of President Obama.

¹ In 1987, the United States had 17 manoeuvre brigades comprising 350,000 troops in Europe, most of them in Germany. It also had about 670 combat aircraft at its disposal for defence against the Warsaw Pact.

Looking at the first “C”, which stands for “Capabilities”, the challenge posed by Russia is to be countered by modernizing the US potential for nuclear deterrence, drones, long-range bombers, cyber and electronic warfare, space defence, operations in the information domain and by flexible contingent planning based on rotation. The objective is to maintain the flexibility and sustainability of the US troops along the NATO border. In addition to the improvement of the capability of the military infrastructure and to the modernization of the troops, the aim is also to increase US military presence by proceeding with what is called the rotation system. This means that about 4,000 troops and 2,000 vehicles will be deployed from the United States to Europe where they will not merely serve the purpose of deterrence but also participate in exercises.

To realize this goal, extensive logistic transports and troop movements are required, also through Germany. This also contributes to gathering experience as to how the Alliance can quickly deploy forces within Europe to its borders.² The number of forces stationed in Europe, however, remains more or less the same due to the continuous rotation of the units earmarked for this purpose. This nine-month rotation of a combat brigade, which is currently employed in Poland, and of another army aviation brigade, equipped with approx. 90 helicopters, means that as many as about 29,000 US soldiers are present in Europe at the moment. And the Americans do not only cover the north-eastern flank of NATO but also commit themselves in the south-eastern part of the Alliance. Rotating forces are also present in Romania and Bulgaria. The advantage hoped for is that even in the event of a crisis in the Black Sea, the follow-up of additional reaction forces will be made easier. The US Marine Corps alone participates in the protection of the south-eastern flank with 1,300 Marines, also in the form of a rotation that lasts nine months.

Yet, the associated amount of “Contribution” to the increased number of exercise activities is more important than the mere presence of troops and capabilities. The United States participates in numerous large and small-scale exercises and training projects. *Saber Strike*, a multinational US-led major exercise of this kind, ended a few days ago in Poland. 18,000 troops from 19 different nations were involved in the training of the forward-deployed battlegroups and of other reinforcement forces. This exercise format is no exception. At an even larger scale, among others, the US-led exercise *Saber Guardian* was held in Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria in 2017 as one of the biggest exercises for land forces. Apart from the United States with 14,000 troops, another 21 nations with altogether 11,000 troops, including forces from Germany, came together with the objective of training how to cross major rivers under combat conditions.

The aim of these exercises, mentioned by way of example, is not only to enhance interoperability, a common situation picture and situational understanding as well as coordinated action. They also send a clear signal to the outside world: The United States honour their commitment to support the European partners and the transatlantic willingness for collective defence. The Pentagon is aware of the fact that such exercises do not only achieve a purely military effect but also have a diplomatic impact by creating mutual confidence.

Looking at the third C, which means “Cash” and constitutes the financial dimension of the Reassurance Initiative, it becomes apparent that the United States is clearly willing to provide material support for Europe’s defence. Apart from the fact that Washington already contributes a substantial amount of money to NATO, the Pentagon increased the figures for funding defence efforts in Europe also under Trump. Thus, in 2015, expenses for the “European Reassurance Initiative” amounted to initially 985 million US dollars, followed by an increase of another 789 million in 2016. In the Trump period, financial support of the deterrence measures is estimated to have risen from 4.6 billion dollars in 2018 to 6.5 billion dollars in 2019. In 2019, about 50 per cent of the expenses are to be earmarked for the forward deployment of major defence equipment such as tanks, artillery and transport vehicles.

² For this logistic dimension, see [Security Policy Working Paper No. 10/2018](#) by the Federal Academy for Security Policy.

For the US Army, this means, for example, that additional materiel and equipment must be kept available for two armoured manoeuvre brigades (consisting of 9,000 troops and equipped with 180 main battle tanks and 180 armoured infantry combat vehicles), two artillery brigades and forces committed to air defence, engineer, logistic and transport tasks and in medical care – materiel that is required for independently conducting land-based defensive operations on the eastern flank of NATO. When it comes to the air forces, the development of air bases is pushed forward, as are the contributions to intensified air policing to protect the NATO airspace. With respect to the maritime dimension of defence, the objective is to strengthen anti-submarine and counter-mine capabilities, in particular. The presence of rotating troops will make up the third largest share of the financing volume. Almost 1 billion dollars are planned to be allocated to the rotation forces whereas 230 million will go to the forward-deployed battlegroups and 100 million to the army aviation units. Moreover, another 830 million dollars will be comprehensively invested in military infrastructure in Europe.

Scenarios of future military presence – Why America will stay

Massively increased and permanent forward deployment of major combat units would, however, still not be in the interest of the United States, especially since it does not expect direct confrontation with Russia at the moment. Since 2017, 60,000 US troops have permanently been based in Europe; 24,000 of them belonging to the land forces. As compared to 2012, their total number has decreased by 12,000. The domestic constellation in the United States should not be neglected in this context, either. Similar to Europe, stationing decisions always have a direct impact on constituencies and votes. Finally, deployments to Europe are always a decision against the local US economy and against one's own constituency in Congress - which in times of "America First" and of the upcoming parliamentary elections in November 2018 does not seem very attractive from a political perspective.

Accordingly, the United States will continue to focus on keeping fewer permanent forces ready in Europe, on moving materiel to forward positions instead, and on creating resilient reception structures for rapid reaction forces. It will therefore be important for the Pentagon to be in a position to keep the sea and airlift to Europe open in the event of a crisis and to rapidly deploy troops via the logistic hubs in Europe, of which Germany will be the most important one. The military focus in Europe will thus be placed on the increased operational readiness and on the availability and deployability of forces. Bases and facilities providing logistic and operational support to the global presence of US troops, such as Ramstein Air Base or US Africa Command (AFRICOM) in Stuttgart, will be of importance, too, provided that there will be a certain continuity in the Pentagon. It can be assumed that the Department of Defence of the United States of America will throw all these factors into the balance during the audit of costs recently commissioned by the White House.

Changes are most likely plausible with respect to the composition of the rotating troops and to the capability development of the armed forces. Enhancements can be considered for standoff precision weapons, such as cruise missiles, modern combat aircraft, extended air defence and missile defence, combat helicopters, reconnaissance and electronic warfare as well as for special forces. They would, however, not come as a surprise but would result from the experience gained over four years of reassurance and from the assumed threat scenario. Notwithstanding bilateral cooperation, NATO will remain the pivot for power development for the Americans. It is possible that the Pentagon will not only adhere to the capability contributions already agreed upon in NATO, but will even expand them. This will be accompanied by bilateral agreements between the United States and its allies. Germany, in particular, will be an addressee in this context, of which the US expects in return that it will make a substantial national contribution to collective defence. Everywhere it is heard that the Americans objectively but vehemently address this message to Berlin.

In conclusion, it becomes clear that Trump's continued presidency has not had a negative impact on the factual military commitment of the US in Europe yet and that the bilateral relations between the armed forces involved are not eroding. Washington still pursues the policy of limited forward deployment, also because the US is rightly entitled to expect that the Europeans will contribute to their defence on their own initiative, true to the American saying "Freedom isn't free."

Major (GS) Philipp Lange is Executive Assistant to the President of the Federal Academy for Security Policy. This paper reflects the personal views of its author.