

# STRATEGIC COMPETITION AND BASING IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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## Executive summary

After the end of the Cold War, the United States slowly shifted its focus away from guaranteeing European security to countering the rise of China. In the 1990s, the United States steadily reduced the number of U.S. troops stationed in Europe. Russia also withdrew large numbers of troops, retaining only some legacy bases in former Soviet states.

However, over the past decade, Russia has modernized and expanded its military footprint along NATO's eastern flank. And this effort — particularly Moscow's incursions in Ukraine both in 2014 and now — has revitalized the NATO alliance. In response to Russia's increased aggression, the United States and NATO initially set up a tripwire defense of Europe based on rotational forward deployments. Now, with full blown war on the continent, the United States has once again raised the number of troops deployed in Europe, including small numbers on a permanent basis.

Regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, Russia will likely pose an enduring threat to peace and stability on the European continent. Given this

reality, Washington faces the challenge of adjusting its basing strategy in Europe to balance its European commitments with its high-priority commitment to address emerging threats from China. The degraded European security environment is a real threat to the U.S.-led liberal order. Defending Europe and maintaining transatlantic unity are critical tasks for Washington that will likely require greater sustained troop presence in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), as well as careful alliance management.

## Introduction

For much of the 20th century, the European continent was the center of the global struggle for influence between East and West before receding in the face of new challenges such as the Global War on Terror. Now, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has refocused Europe as a focal point of strategic competition in the modern era. Today, the security arrangements of the immediate post-Cold War period appear to be anomalous, with both Russia and the West enhancing their military posture in the region.

Of course, the contemporary global landscape differs greatly from the Cold War period. The rise of China has changed Western security priorities and weakened Russia's relative position in the international system. As a result, although the West has reaffirmed its commitment to upholding European security and NATO is experiencing a renaissance, the West is deploying significantly fewer relative resources to CEE than it did during the Cold War. Moreover, recent U.S. strategic documents such as the National Security Strategy highlight the American perception that while Russia is an immediate danger to Western interests, China is the only serious threat to a U.S.-led liberal world order.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, both the United States and Russia have been cautious and avoided placing troops in each other's historical sphere of influence. Since the Cold War, U.S. troop numbers in Europe have fallen dramatically, largely due to shifts in NATO's mission and the United States' foreign policy priorities. Russia's foreign military installations in the region are mostly Soviet legacy facilities, although Moscow has expanded its military presence near the Arctic (by placing specialized brigade forces close to the borders of Finland and Norway) and Ukraine (by constructing new bases close to the border of Ukraine and in Belarus).

In response to the Russia-Ukraine war, the United States has deployed additional troops to CEE and may consider stationing more permanent troops on NATO's eastern flank. However, even if it does, U.S. foreign policy will remain focused on shifting the burden of European security to NATO and European allies. Russia, meanwhile, will likely remain focused on preserving a significant military presence along its borders to protect its territory and sustain a de-facto buffer zone.

## The United States: From defending Europe to creating a balance

After World War II, the United States deployed hundreds of thousands of troops to Western Europe, both to stabilize the post-War continent and to project U.S. power. During the late 1950s, more than 400,000 U.S. troops were permanently stationed in Europe.<sup>2</sup> But since then, troop levels have decreased considerably. In the early 1990s, at the end of the Cold War, the number decreased to fewer than 200,000 troops.<sup>3</sup> In 1991, the Warsaw Pact ended officially on February 25 and the Soviet Union collapsed later that year, leading NATO to redefine its mission from deterring and countering Soviet aggression to upholding general European security and helping allies build their own military capabilities. These changes, and the diminished perceived threat from Russia, led successive U.S. presidents to reduce troop levels in Europe to a fewer than 75,000 in 2018.<sup>4</sup>

Today, about 100,000 U.S. troops are stationed in Europe, with about half (38,000) hosted in Germany.<sup>5</sup> Only a small number of these troops are permanently stationed within CEE, many of which are part of an additional 7,000 U.S. troops deployed on short rotational assignments under Atlantic Resolve, a NATO support mission.<sup>6</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has signed several agreements to base U.S. troops CEE but has created only two new foreign military facilities, one in Poland and one in Romania (see table 1).

TABLE 1

## U.S. military facilities in CEE

COUNTRY	TYPE OF BASE/FACILITY	NUMBER OF TROOPS	FORMAL APPROVAL OF HOST COUNTRY	CONTRACT END DATE
Bulgaria	U.S.-Bulgaria joint military bases	2,500	Yes, but the bases operate under the Bulgarian flag/command	Indefinite: either party must give one year's notice to end agreement.
Poland	Naval Support Facility Redzikowo	86	Yes	Initial period of 20 years, automatically renewed for 5 years unless either party gives 2 years notice.
Poland	Lask Air Base (permanent home to U.S. Air Force detachment since 2012)	Up to 200 personnel	Yes, but the base operates under the Polish flag/command	Unknown
Romania	Naval Support Facility Deveselu	250	Yes	One party one year written notice term

**Sources:** Defense Cooperation Agreement between the United States of America and Bulgaria, April 28, 2006, [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/06-612-Bulgaria-Defense-Cooperation.done\\_.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/06-612-Bulgaria-Defense-Cooperation.done_.pdf); Agreement Between the United States of America and the Government of the Republic of Poland Concerning the Deployment of Ground-Based Ballistic Missile Defense Interceptors in the Territory of the Republic of Poland, August 20, 2008, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/180542.pdf>; U.S. Department of State, "The United States and Romania: Strategic Partners for 25 Years," November 28, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-and-romania-strategic-partners-for-25-years/>; Defense Status of Forces Agreement Between the United States and Romania, December 6, 2005, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/06-721-Romania-Defense-SOFA.pdf>.

The most significant installations noted in table 1 are the two naval support facilities in Poland and Romania, which also host Aegis Ashore missile defense ground sites. The deployment of these defense systems to Europe caused a dispute with Moscow, which believed that they would threaten Russia's ability to target the United States with intercontinental ballistic missiles. In 2018, the Russian foreign ministry claimed that the deployment of these systems flagrantly violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, arguing that the "launchers allow for the combat use of Tomahawk medium-range cruise missiles and other strike armaments from the ground."<sup>7</sup> In 2019, both the United States and Russia suspended their commitment to maintaining the INF Treaty.

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, U.S. allies in CEE have consistently asked for more defense support and have offered to host U.S. troops. In addition to the NATO support missions outlined in table 2, Lithuania constructed Camp Herkus, a 7 million euro (approximately 8.19 million USD) project to entice the United States to establish a permanent military presence in Lithuania. In 2021, Lithuania's Minister of National Defense Arvydas Anušauskas stated, "We hope that this new infrastructure in Pabrade will become the second home for the U.S. force."<sup>8</sup> However, given U.S. national security priorities in East Asia, this is unlikely to happen.

Following the annexation, U.S. and NATO planners set up a tripwire defense in Poland and the Baltics based on rotational deployments. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO member states decided to deploy four multinational battle groups to vulnerable areas; in 2017, groups were deployed to Estonia,

Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. After Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO announced that it would reinforce current battle groups and establish four more in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.<sup>9</sup>

**TABLE 2**

### NATO enhanced forward presence

HOST COUNTRY	LEAD	PARTICIPATING NATIONS	NUMBER OF TROOPS
Estonia (Tapa)	United Kingdom	Denmark and Iceland	1,430
Latvia (Adazi)	Canada	Albania, Czech Republic, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, Montenegro, Poland, Slovenia, and Spain	1,887
Lithuania (Rukla)	Germany	Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Iceland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Norway	1,632
Poland (Orzysz)	United States	Croatia, Romania, and United Kingdom	1,033
Bulgaria (Kabile)	Italy	Albania, Greece, North Macedonia, and United States	968
Hungary (Tata)	Hungary	Croatia, Italy, Montenegro, Turkey, and United States	900
Romania (Cincu)	France	North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Netherlands, and United States	1,148
Slovakia (Lest)	Czech Republic	Germany, Netherlands, and Slovenia	643

**Source:** "NATO's Forward Presence," June 2022, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/2206-factsheet\\_efp\\_en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/2206-factsheet_efp_en.pdf); "NATO's Military Presence in the East of the Alliance," December 21, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_136388.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm).

This tripwire approach, however, may no longer be sufficient in today's degraded security environment. In June 2022 at the NATO summit in Madrid, Spain, U.S. President Joe Biden announced that the United States would enhance its force posture in Europe, including by establishing a permanent Army Corps forward command post in Poland and positioning further rotational troops in Romania and the Baltics.<sup>10</sup> The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO will also shift the balance of forces in Europe. The participation of these states will help make NATO's vision for an integrated defense of Europe far more feasible.

These decisions indicate that the United States recognizes the need for longer-term deterrent capability in Europe, regardless of when and how the Ukraine conflict ends. As a result, Washington will have to balance its increasing security commitments in East Asia with those in Europe. Its expanded efforts in Europe will likely involve sustained increases in U.S. troops in Poland, the Baltics, and in the Black Sea region as well as further integration in support of NATO's new northern flank. Washington should also consider supporting partnerships and engagements in the Balkans, which are a fertile breeding ground for anti-European and pro-Russian sentiment.

## Russia: From projecting power to protecting the homeland

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union had an extensive network of foreign military installations — the majority of which were located in CEE in Warsaw Pact countries. In the region, Soviet military forces were based in Albania, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland. At the end of the Cold War, Soviet forces were withdrawn from all bases outside of Soviet boundaries. Russia withdrew forces from the Baltic states in the early 1990s and closed its bases in Georgia in the 2000s.<sup>11</sup> It did, however, retain peacekeeping forces in the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and has maintained a continuous military presence in Transnistria (see table 3). Today, Russia has less than 20 foreign military bases globally.<sup>12</sup>

TABLE 3

### Russian military installations in CEE

COUNTRY	TYPE OF BASE/ FACILITY	NUMBER OF TROOPS	FORMAL APPROVAL OF HOST COUNTRY	CONTRACT END DATE
Armenia	102nd Military Base	3,300	Yes	2044
Belarus	474th Radar Station	1,450	Yes	2021
Belarus	43rd Naval Communications Center	1,450	Yes	2021
Belarus	Joint Training Center (Grodno)		Yes, but the center operates under the Belarusian flag (staging area for Ukraine)	Unknown
Georgia (Abkhazia)	7th Military Base	4,000	No (disputed)	Unknown
Georgia (South Ossetia)	4th Guards Military Base	4,000	No (disputed)	Unknown
Moldova (Transnistria)		1,500	No	2002
Ukraine/RU (disputed)	Sevastopol Naval Base (Crimea)			Unknown

**Sources:** Author database from working paper 2023; Margarete Klein, "Russia's Military Policy in the Post-Soviet Space: Aims, Instruments, and Perspectives," January 2019, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research\\_papers/2019RP01\\_kle.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2019RP01_kle.pdf).

Russia's disastrous military performance in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war became the proximate cause for a major military modernization. In addition to other measures, this reform included consolidating and modernizing military infrastructure in Moscow's near abroad. The 1995 decree governing Russian policy toward the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) includes "maintaining reliable stability in all its meanings: political, military, economic, humanitarian, and legal" and dictates that Russia will "assist the formation of CIS states as politically and economically viable states that conduct friendly policies towards Russia."<sup>13</sup> Throughout the region, Moscow's legacy bases now support Russian security objectives, which mostly focus on regional threats and deterrence. Bases in the Caucasus allow

Moscow to maintain the status quo, quickly deploy its troops, and uphold regional security dominance. Russia's presence in Crimea (home of the Black Sea Fleet) and along Ukraine's eastern border facilitates sustained deployments in Eastern Ukraine, control of the Black Sea, and defense of a buffer zone. Its bases in Central Asia also project Russian power and allow forces to rapidly deploy along Russia's southern border in the event of a crisis. Like other great power facilities, Moscow's legacy bases aim to project status within their sphere of influence.

In recent years, Moscow's basing posture in CEE has focused on defending vulnerable areas through expanding military cooperation with Belarus and constructing new bases on its own territory around

Ukraine. In 2013, Russia expressed the desire to formally build and commission an air base in Belarus that would improve its forward presence vis-à-vis NATO. However, after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Minsk, perceiving increased bargaining power in light of Russia's dismal relations with the West, rejected Moscow's proposal. The project was then put on hold during Russia's activities in Syria, and the Russian army established a new division along its border with Belarus and reinforced air defenses in Kaliningrad. Yet, years later in May 2021, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko agreed to hosting a joint Belarusian-Russian military training unit, including combat capable Russian forces, near Grodno. And, in October 2021, reversing the earlier rejection, Lukashenko announced that Russia and Belarus have a "single army" in practice and that "a joint military base with Russia" would be created in Belarus in case of an external attack.<sup>14</sup>

In February 2022, Moscow deployed the largest ever number of Russian troops (approximately 30,000) and weaponry — including Iskander missiles, S-400 air defense systems, T-72B3 tanks, and rocket launch systems — to Belarus for the Union Resolve exercise.<sup>15</sup> Although Union Resolve 2022 officially ended on February 20, 2022, Russian forces remained in Belarus after this date and were deployed for Russia's offensive on Kyiv.<sup>16</sup> Russian bombers are also deploying from Belarus' Baranovichi and Lida airfields, and Moscow is operating 50 airborne early warning and control aircraft from these fields to coordinate its air operations in Ukraine.<sup>17</sup>

The war in Ukraine has precipitated a dramatic acceleration in Russia-Belarus military cooperation and has set up a de-facto lasting and indefinite military presence in Belarus, despite the absence of a formal permanent Russian military base. Given the rapid integration of the Russian and Belarusian defense systems, it is unlikely that this cooperation will be reversed in the near future. In many respects, Belarus is a de-facto extension of Russia's Western Military District.

The war and Russia's perception of a diminished security environment have also precipitated the construction of several new bases near Ukraine — in the Russian regions of Belgorod, Rostov, and Voronezh — most likely to reorient Moscow's forces to surround and contain Ukraine in the coming years. Of course, Russia has also significantly expanded its military presence in Crimea. Among other efforts, it has modernized 12 military facilities on the Crimean peninsula to host a variety of permanent deployments.

Despite these expansions, in light of Russia's disastrous military performance in Ukraine and the strong probability that the conflict will continue at some level for the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that Moscow will deviate from the patterns of post-Soviet basing. And these patterns indicate that Russia's primary national security focus is protecting its homeland through maintaining a buffer zone that is supported by bases in neighboring states and in Russian regions close to Ukraine.

## Policy recommendations

Estimates of Russian casualties from the war in Ukraine vary widely, from around 10,000 to around 100,000.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of the true number, these casualties and the severe Western sanctions imposed on Moscow will have a deleterious effect on the Russian economy for decades. Prior to the war, Russia was attempting to expand its role on the global stage through limited power projection outside of its sphere of influence in Africa, Syria, and other areas. Now, with even more limited resources, militarily, Moscow will likely remain focused on defending what it perceives to be its primary sphere of influence and buffer zone: Ukraine and Belarus.<sup>19</sup> Politically, Moscow will likely remain focused on fracturing Western unity in NATO and the European Union. As U.S. defense planners prioritize addressing



the challenge of China, maintaining a deterrent presence in the CEE will be crucial for reassuring allies and maintaining the European security architecture. However, U.S. policymakers should be cognizant that new, large deployments, as well as NATO exercises at Russia's borders, will raise alarm in a paranoid and wounded Kremlin.<sup>20</sup>

## REGIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

- Upholding NATO unity will remain a critical task for the foreseeable future. Washington must balance its long-term priority of turning over the defense of Europe to the Europeans with the near-term urgent challenge of safeguarding European security and the liberal world order. For now, Washington must continue to provide sizable military personnel and high-tech weaponry even as other alliance members promise to swiftly raise defense spending.
- There are no Chinese military installations on the European continent, but Chinese infrastructure investments — including ports in Greece and more than \$1 billion annually in the western Balkans<sup>21</sup> — raise the prospect of Chinese power projection in the region. The Biden administration should work with its European allies to strengthen Western partnerships in the western Balkans, including by supporting Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania's bid for membership into the Schengen Agreement.

## MILITARY ARRANGEMENTS

- For the most part, Washington and Moscow have avoided placing military facilities in the other's sphere of influence. However, the installations of the Aegis Ashore systems in Poland and Romania have certainly contributed to Moscow's increased threat perception and the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West over the past decade. Bolstering security in response to Russian aggression does not require a return to Cold War-era military arrangements in Europe, but it may require Washington to move away

from tripwire rotational forward deployments toward more permanent arrangements on NATO's eastern flank.

- To counter Russia's increased troop presence in Belarus, the United States should consider modestly increasing troop levels in Poland, particularly in the east near the Suwalki Gap (the land corridor separating Kaliningrad and Belarus). Options that minimize the risk of escalation include the potential deployment of another multinational brigade, with a third allied country acting as a lead nation.
- Washington should also increase its troop presence in the exposed Baltic states but should ensure that its allies do the same. One potential opportunity is supporting Sweden's suggestion to create a new Maritime Component Command in Sweden to help solidify the alliance's control of the Baltic and Gulf of Finland.

The China challenge ensures that the United States will not expand its troop presence to the level seen during the Cold War. The Biden administration must walk a fine line, upholding transatlantic unity on the defense of Europe while also ensuring that European states do not walk back on their promises to shoulder more of the burden.



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