

## ***Military Cuts Render NATO Less Formidable as Deterrent to Russia***

By **HELENE COOPER** and **STEVEN ERLANGER** MARCH 26, 2014

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Ukrainian soldiers on Wednesday. Ukraine has started withdrawing its troops and weapons from Crimea, now controlled by Russia. Credit Pavel Golovkin/Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Obama and European leaders pledged Wednesday to bolster the NATO alliance and vowed that Russia would not be allowed to run roughshod over its neighbors. But the military reality on the ground in Europe tells a different story.

The United States, by far the most powerful NATO member, has drastically cut back its European forces from a decade ago. European countries, which have always lagged far behind the United States in military might, have struggled and largely failed to come up with additional military spending at a time of economic anemia and budget cuts.

During the height of the Cold War, United States troops in Europe numbered around 400,000, a combat-ready force designed to quickly deploy and defend Western Europe — particularly what was then West Germany — against a potential Soviet advance.

Today there are about 67,000 American troops in Europe, including 40,000 in Germany, with the rest scattered mostly in Italy and Britain. The Air Force has some 130 fighter jets, 12 refueling planes and 30 cargo aircraft. At the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, it had 800 aircraft in Europe



### **Obama Gives Speech in Brussels**

At the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, the president appealed to Europeans to stand behind the ideals of freedom and human dignity, and deplored Russia's "brute force" in Ukraine.

The United States Navy, meanwhile, has dropped to 7,000 sailors and Marines, down from the 40,000 sailors who were stationed at nine major Navy bases during the height of the Cold War. Today, there are no American aircraft carrier groups based in the Mediterranean, although the Navy does have one destroyer deployed at Cádiz, Spain.

In other words, "the limited ground forces in Europe are not designed to suddenly project power against Russia in a number of days," said Anthony H. Cordesman, a military analyst with the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#). "Basically, the most constructive thing you can do is not create such a challenge that Russia would feel compelled to respond."

Pentagon officials will not make public precise details about the American arsenal of weapons and equipment in Europe for security reasons. But an official with European Command, which is responsible for American military operations in Europe, said Wednesday that the American military presence there was 85 percent smaller than it was in 1989

In the past quarter-century, the United States has divested itself of hundreds of bases and radio and radar positions originally meant to protect Western Europe from the Soviet Union.

Even if Russia moves into eastern Ukraine, senior administration officials said, there should be absolutely no expectation that American troops would head to Kiev.

“The American people are not going to war with Russia over Ukraine, full stop,” a senior administration official said, echoing public comments by Mr. Obama.

In recent years American officials have sharply criticized NATO nations as not spending enough on their militaries and in effect subcontracting their defense to the United States. Mr. Obama returned to that theme at a news conference with European Union officials in Brussels on Wednesday, when he professed “concerns about a diminished level of defense spending among some of our partners in NATO.”

In part to force European nations to pay more, Mr. Obama has continued the most recent drawdown of American forces from Europe that started in the George W. Bush administration. But Mr. Obama is cutting the forces to new lows. Citing budget constraints, he recently announced plans to reduce the Army to its smallest level since before the World War II buildup.

European officials, who are balancing their own budget cuts, have made clear their distaste for engaging militarily in Ukraine. So far NATO has taken a series of relatively modest military steps to reassure its East European members, including sending two NATO surveillance planes to patrol Polish and Romanian airspace. The United States has sent six F-15 fighters to Lithuania to bolster a NATO air policing mission in the Baltic States and has sent 12 F-16s to Poland, which borders Ukraine.

But moving beyond that would require a wholesale rethinking of the downsizing of the American strategic posture in Europe. European allies would have to at least slow cuts in military spending and renew debate on how that money is spent.

NATO has agreed that member countries should spend 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense and should cooperate more to reduce expensive overlaps. But last year only a handful of NATO countries met the target, [according to NATO figures](#), with the United States leading the way at 4.1 percent. Overall, European members of NATO were at 1.6 percent.

Richard Dannatt, the former chief of staff of the British armed forces, made a public plea this week that the British government reverse its plans to reduce regular army troops to their lowest number since the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 — some 82,000 — by 2018, and to withdraw all of its 20,000 troops from Germany. Mr. Dannatt said that Britain should keep 3,000 troops in Germany as a “statement of military capability to underpin diplomacy.”

“With a resurgent Russia,” he said, “this is a poor moment for the U.S.-led West to be weak in resolve and muscle.” Diplomacy and sanctions may be the right response for now, he said, but the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin, “will look beyond those things to see where the real check on his actions might come from.”

To be sure, even during the Cold War, when America had hundreds of thousands of troops in Europe and aircraft carriers, destroyers and fighter aircraft at close reach, American military planners were making no plans to enter Ukraine. The country was, after all, then the domain of the Soviet Union.

“The Germans lost World War II in the Ukraine,” said George Friedman, chairman of [Stratfor](#), a strategic risk analysis company. “You’re fighting on the Russian doorstep with limited resources in the place that’s been a graveyard of other military ambitions.”

With no sea access to Ukraine save the narrow Bosphorus through Turkey to the Black Sea, American and NATO ships trying to get there would be sitting ducks, necessitating the need to knock out any Russian air defenses with the American B2 stealth bombers that were used during the first days of the Iraq war, military experts said.

An air fight with Russia would most likely entail much more than anything the United States has seen in decades. And things could spiral quickly.

“If the U.S. fields an inferior conventional force in Ukraine that faced a superior Russian force, that would entail a potential escalation to a higher level of intensity,” said Loren B. Thompson, chief operating officer of the [Lexington Institute](#), a research organization.

A Pentagon official said Tuesday that “all things being equal, the United States military is vastly superior to Russia’s, but that doesn’t mean we’re looking to get into a fight with them.”

NATO has refrained from deploying a substantial number of troops in member states bordering Russia — “a unilateral promise made to Moscow in 1997, when Russia was behaving more cooperatively,” said Ivo H. Daalder, the former American ambassador to NATO. He urged “sound plans, forward deployment of real capabilities and demonstrable will.”

Helene Cooper reported from Washington, and Steven Erlanger from Paris. Michael R. Gordon contributed reporting from Amman, Jordan.

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