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Overdue Retrenchment: Immediately Reducing the United States' Defense Posture in Europe

By Cody Fenimore

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past seven decades since the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) formation, the United States has provided the overwhelming majority of Europe's defense. Born from a sense of duty to help European countries stabilize and to prevent the spread of communism after the Second World War, this unequal burden sharing arrangement has bred dependency among America's European allies. Despite years of prosperity among individual countries and as a bloc, European defense capabilities have atrophied, and their repeated commitments to meet NATO's defense spending benchmarks have lagged given the security blanket of the continued U.S. presence. With the fall of the Soviet Union decreasing the chance for conflict on the continent, and as American strategic interest shifts to other regions like the Indo-Pacific, maintaining an expansive European footprint dilutes the United States' strategic focus, consumes scarce defense resources, and allows its European allies to perpetuate an unsustainable security architecture.

This paper argues that an immediate, deliberate retrenchment of U.S. military forces from Europe is both strategically feasible and long overdue. It finds that Europe now possesses overwhelming economic, demographic, and military advantages over its regional threat, Russia, whose conventional weakness has been

Cody Fenimore is a Senior Account Manager at Daniels Spaulding Consulting, where he has led fundraising efforts for statewide and federal campaigns in Indiana. He brings international experience as an alumni of the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange program and as a Virtual Student Intern with the U.S. Department of State.

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exposed by its failed invasion of Ukraine, while continued U.S. overcommitment risks provoking escalation and constraining Washington's ability to respond to higher-priority threats elsewhere. To address these challenges, the paper proposes a phased but decisive posture shift: the immediate withdrawal of rotational and surge ground forces; substantial reductions in U.S. air and naval assets that do not align with core U.S. interests; the retention of stabilizing nuclear deterrence and flexible offshore capabilities; and the transfer of nonessential defense functions and NATO leadership responsibilities to European allies. Framed not as abandonment but as strategic realignment, this approach would restore NATO's defensive purpose, compel long-delayed European burden-sharing, and allow the United States to preserve deterrence while regaining the strategic flexibility required in an era of intensifying global competition.

Background: US Postwar Posture in Europe

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has maintained troops in Europe to serve as a stabilizing force in a formerly war-torn region and as a deterrent to an encroachment of Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces. NATO was formed in 1949, formalizing U.S. involvement in Europe through a collective defense alliance. Crucially, however, NATO was not initially presented to the American public as a permanent military commitment. During a 1949 Senate hearing on U.S. accession to NATO, Secretary of State Dean Acheson was asked whether the alliance would require "substantial numbers of troops over there as a more or less permanent contribution to the development of these countries' capacity to resist." Acheson responded emphatically that "the answer to that question, Senator, is a clear and absolute NO!"¹

Despite these assurances, the number of post-war U.S. military personnel on the continent expanded rapidly in the late 1950s, peaking at roughly 475,000.² As U.S. military personnel in Europe reached their height, the Eisenhower Administration was working to build a European "Third Force" capable of assuming greater responsibility for the continent's defense. By 1959, however, the Administration had acknowledged that this effort had failed, with President Eisenhower

himself admitting that European countries were more than willing to let Americans carry much of the burden of their defense.³ From that point forward, what was intended as a temporary security commitment became a lasting feature of U.S. strategy in Europe.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, U.S. military personnel in Europe declined to around 100,000 to 115,000.⁴ This range remained consistent until Washington's strategic focus shifted to the Middle East and Central Asia after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵ From 2008 to 2021, the number of U.S. troops present in Europe averaged around 60,000, before rising again after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when approximately 20,000 additional U.S. troops were surged into the region with the intention of supporting Ukraine and helping to contain the conflict.⁶

As of 2025, the total U.S. military presence in Europe stands at roughly 90,000 personnel distributed among more than forty U.S. military bases across the continent. Troop concentrations include approximately 39,000 in Germany, 13,000 in Italy, 5,000 in Romania, 14,000 in Poland and 10,000 in the United Kingdom.⁷ Along with ground forces, the conventional U.S. military presence in Europe includes seven Air Force fighter squadrons, approximately six naval destroyers stationed in the Mediterranean and periodic deployments of a carrier strike group, like the USS Gerald R. Ford, that was positioned in the Adriatic Sea as recently as October 20th, 2025.⁸

Following the 2022 surge of U.S. troops into the region after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, U.S. ground forces shifted from a 3+1 model of three armored or infantry brigade combat teams (BCTs) plus one headquarters to a 5+2 model consisting of five armored or infantry BCTs plus two headquarters elements. Each BCT includes roughly 5,000 personnel composed of active-duty soldiers and support units.⁹ Although not officially confirmed out of strategic necessity, it is widely believed that the United States currently maintains around one hundred B61 gravity bombs, smaller tactical nuclear weapons, at bases in Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, and Turkey.¹⁰ While European allies are not able to use these nuclear weapons without U.S. authorization, several allied air forces maintain dual-capable aircraft

with the ability to deliver the B61 nuclear gravity bomb.¹¹

Why US Retrenchment is Needed Now

There are three primary reasons why an immediate retrenchment of U.S. military assets in Europe is necessary.

The Free-Riding Problem

First, the U.S. military presence in Europe has become a strategic crutch, allowing European nations to avoid investments in their own military capabilities and defense infrastructure. Despite benefiting primarily from the security provided by U.S. forces, Europe currently covers only about 34 percent of the operating costs for U.S. bases on the continent.¹² European defense infrastructure has also been allowed to steadily erode, forcing the United States to offset shortfalls in European reserves, such as replenishing ammunition expended during NATO operations in Libya in 2011 and for weapons systems transferred to Ukraine following Russia's 2022 invasion.¹³

While part of this imbalance stems from U.S. defense interests and, at times, U.S. policymakers encouraging European purchases of American weapons systems, the deeper issue lies in Europe's long-standing reluctance to invest adequately in its own defense. For decades, European governments have relied on U.S. security guarantees through NATO rather than developing independent military capabilities. That dynamic, however, is beginning to change. The prospect of U.S. retrenchment is already prompting a shift in the European mindset.

In March 2025, the European Commission launched its *ReArm Europe* initiative, relaxing its fiscal rules to permit greater defense borrowing and freeing up an estimated \$800 billion for member states to invest in military capabilities.¹⁴ Several European governments have begun to assume greater responsibility for their own defense by substantially increasing their defense budgets. Political leaders, such as German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, have explicitly called for Europe to strengthen its capabilities and achieve independence from the United States as quickly as possible amid concerns of a possible U.S. withdrawal under the

Trump Administration.¹⁵ Germany has pledged to raise its defense budget to €153 billion, 3.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), by 2029, up from €86 billion, or 2.4 percent of GDP, in 2025. Other European states are following suit: France plans to increase defense spending to roughly €80 billion by 2030, up from €62 billion in 2025, while Poland allocated €44 billion to defense in 2025, amounting to 4.7 percent of its GDP.¹⁶

The Russian Bear Without Teeth

Second, Russia no longer poses the strategic threat to Europe that it once did, and the current scale of the U.S. military presence on the continent is disproportionate to the level of risk it may run, potentially to the point of provoking the very aggression it seeks to deter. Russia's faltering invasion of Ukraine has exposed the limits of its conventional military power. As of September 2025, Russian forces have only occupied around one percent of Ukrainian territory and have failed to capture a single Ukrainian regional capital.¹⁷ Estimates indicate that Russia has lost more than 1,200,000 troops since the invasion began in 2022.¹⁸ Given the Russian losses sustained to seize a fraction of a non-NATO country, it is difficult to view Russia as capable of mounting a credible large-scale offensive against the European continent.

In addition to Russia's internal weaknesses, Europe's economic and military resources vastly exceed those of Russia. In 2024, the combined GDP of European Union (EU) member states totaled approximately \$19 trillion, compared to just \$2 trillion in Russia. The EU's population, at roughly 449 million, is more than triple Russia's 145 million. European defense spending also greatly surpasses Moscow's with EU nations collectively allocating \$457 billion to defense in 2024, compared to Russia's \$146 billion.¹⁹ Even in the nuclear domain, one of the few areas where Russia holds an advantage, two European NATO members, the United Kingdom and France, possess independent nuclear arsenals. The prospect of mutually assured destruction with Europe would deter Russia from employing their nuclear weapons offensively. Given these economic and military advantages, Europe already possesses the capacity to deter a conventional Russian invasion which is the very scenario often used to justify a sustained U.S. troop presence on the continent.

Rather than deterring conflict, the buildup of U.S. forces in Europe may actually encourage a more aggressive Russian posture by reinforcing Moscow's perception of NATO as an immediate threat. In response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, a non-NATO state, the United States deployed an additional 20,000 troops to countries bordering Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.²⁰ Moscow claimed that this action "heightened tension and reduced the scope for a political solution."²¹ A similar dynamic could emerge if Washington proceeds with plans to deploy a Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF) Strategic Fires Battalion to Germany. On July 10, 2024, the White House issued a joint statement with Germany that, "The United States will begin episodic deployments of the long-range fires capabilities of its Multi-Domain Task Force in Germany in 2026, as part of planning for enduring stationing of these capabilities in the future."²² The MDTF, equipped with Tomahawk missiles and developmental hypersonic weapons, is designed for long-range strike operations, not defense, and would possess the capability to hit targets within Russian territory. Deploying this type of offensive system in Europe would deepen U.S. entanglement in the region and risk further provoking Russian escalation.²³

Trade-Offs

Third, maintaining a large U.S. troop presence in Europe limits Washington's ability to allocate military resources to regions of greater strategic importance. A significant and immediate withdrawal is necessary to prevent European bureaucracy and political hesitation from slowing this realignment. In June 2022, shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO released its first strategy document that recognized China as a strategic threat.²⁴ However, the document offered little in the way of concrete measures to address that threat. Europe's continued reliance on the United States for its own defense restricts Washington's ability to adjust military posture to other regions like the Indo-Pacific, where it has more of an interest in preventing a regional hegemon. Allowing Europe to take primary responsibility for its own defense against weaker powers, such as Russia, would free the United States to respond more flexibly to emerging challenges elsewhere, while still upholding NATO's collective defense mission.

Previous attempts to advance European defense autonomy have faced opposition, driven both by European concerns over increased financial burdens and by U.S. reluctance to reduce its influence on the continent or signal diminished resolve. This dynamic was evident in the backlash to the October 2025 decision to return the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team of the 101st Airborne Division from Romania to Kentucky as part of its scheduled rotation out of Eastern Europe.²⁵ Despite the United States still maintaining more troops in Europe than before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the chair of the House Armed Services Committee, Mike Rogers (AL) "strongly oppose[d]" the decision.²⁶ Domestic political pressure, coupled with transatlantic lobbying against retrenchment, increases the risk that a drawn-out, phased reduction will stall or be reversed. This can be seen with the first Trump Administration's 2020 directive to withdraw 11,900 U.S. personnel from Germany, which was halted by the Biden Administration in 2021 and never allowed to proceed.²⁷ This pattern of hesitance to retrenchment negates any discussion of U.S. withdrawal if allies don't increase defense spending and reassures European allies that they can continue to defer the costs and responsibilities to Washington. To begin effective retrenchment, the United States must demonstrate resolve through an immediate withdrawal of initial forces, demonstrating seriousness of intent to cut through the bureaucracy that prevents political efforts from obstructing the process.

Principles for US Retrenchment from Europe

To achieve the ultimate goal of retrenchment from Europe, Washington should adhere to three guiding principles. First and most importantly, the United States must act decisively by initiating an immediate withdrawal of forces to demonstrate its intent without compromising core strategic interests on the continent. While a significant and rapid reduction is necessary, a complete withdrawal cannot, and should not, occur overnight. Units that are permanently stationed in Europe will be harder to withdraw than rotational forces, which operate on timelines. As of March 2025, approximately 65,000 active-duty U.S. troops are permanently based in Europe.²⁸ Many of these personnel have families residing with them in

the host countries where they are stationed and hold essential roles at U.S. operated bases that will need to be transitioned. Rotational units on the other hand can be withdrawn immediately and not replaced after returning to the United States. To ensure steady progress of permanent forces, Washington should establish a detailed withdrawal plan with clearly defined timelines and milestones, gradually reducing its footprint to the minimal level deemed necessary to protect U.S. interests.

US Interests Do Not Require a Large Permanent Military Presence

The United States' primary interest in Europe today is economic. The United States and the European Union maintain the world's largest bilateral trade and investment relationship, with goods and services trade totaling approximately \$1.5 trillion in 2024.²⁹ Given that there is no indication of European interest in altering this mutually-beneficial trade partnership and that Russia's conventional military weakness limits its ability to threaten the continent, there is little risk to this economic relationship, and minimal utility of maintaining large numbers of U.S. troops in Europe. In this context, safeguarding the United States' strategic interests in Europe does not require a permanent military presence, reinforcing the case for a shift toward a lighter footprint.

Transfer Nonessential Defense Functions to Europe

Second, the United States must transfer all nonessential defense functions that do not align with U.S. strategic interests back to its European allies. Europe has repeatedly demonstrated that it will not make the necessary defense investments unless directly compelled to do so. Yet European leaders increasingly acknowledge that they possess the economic and military capacity to assume a far larger share of the burden. In April 2025, Italian Defense Minister Guido Crosetto noted that Europe could fill the removal of 10,000 U.S. troops from Europe with little difficulty. He stated: "It is not unexpected. It is something we have been preparing for a long time; now we will need to understand with what timing it will be made."³⁰ Washington must therefore maintain the commitment to withdrawing forces, recognizing

that Europe has more than enough resources and manpower to match Russia even if it cannot immediately replace every vacancy as U.S. troops depart.

One element of the current U.S. defense posture in Europe that would remain strategically useful while helping to ease European security concerns as allies assume greater responsibility is the continued stationing of U.S. nuclear assets in Europe. The approximately 100 tactical B61 gravity bombs align with the goal of retrenchment since they sustain credible deterrence without the need for U.S. forces on the ground. Maintaining these weapons on the continent is strategic, preserving proximity and responsiveness, should they ever be needed, while keeping the authority to deploy them solely with Washington. Several European allies have aircraft capable of deploying the B61 if authorized. Moreover, the strategic ambiguity surrounding the number and location of these weapons reduces the chance of these bombs being seen as a direct threat to countries like Russia, especially when compared to more overtly offensive capabilities, such as the proposed deployment of MDTF long-range strike systems.

Shifting Responsibility to Europe and Focusing on Defense

The third long-term principle is to use the U.S. troop withdrawal as an opportunity to refocus NATO on its original purpose as a defensive alliance while also reorganizing the alliance to reduce U.S. involvement within its command structure and shifting greater responsibility to the European allies. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has expanded by 20 members, many of them states bordering Russia or formerly aligned with the Soviet Union through the Warsaw Pact.³¹ This steady expansion and perception that NATO has evolved beyond a purely defensive alliance has been cited as one of the contributing factors to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.³²

NATO's involvement in "out of area" operations, notably in Libya and Afghanistan, has also undermined the alliance's defensive identity while straining member-state resources. After the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany contributed the largest troop contingents to the war in Afghanistan, spending approximately \$30 billion and \$19 billion

respectively over the course of the conflict.³³ These operations diverted resources that could have been devoted to territorial defense and weakened NATO's claim to being a purely defensive alliance. By drawing down its conventional presence in Europe, Washington can reinforce the message that NATO must return to its core defensive role. A reduced U.S. footprint would also encourage European allies to evaluate more carefully the strategic implications of adding additional members, particularly those whose accession could heighten tensions with Russia.

The necessary decision to prioritize U.S. strategic flexibility through retrenchment from Europe should not be understood as an abandonment of European allies or a retreat from the United States' commitments to NATO's defensive mission. Instead, it should signal confidence in the strength of the transatlantic relationship and affirm that Washington will remain engaged in supportive and limited defensive roles while Europe assumes responsibility for its own frontline security. As Europe takes on greater frontline operational responsibility, NATO's leadership structure should evolve accordingly. Transferring the position of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander (SACEUR) to a European NATO leader would both reflect this shift and incentivize European governments to further develop and coordinate their defense capabilities. Armida van Rijn, head of the Europe Program at Chatham House, noted that a transition like this "may allow the European NATO allies to get organized and enable NATO to operate as a functional alliance."³⁴ Europe has demonstrated that it is willing to coordinate and lead when needed, as seen with the formation of groups like the "Coalition of the Willing" following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The United States should build on this momentum by gradually disentangling itself from NATO's internal bureaucracy and reinforcing its trust in European allies' capacity to manage the continent's security.

Recommendations

This paper's recommendations for U.S. retrenchment from Europe focus on shifting the burden of ground, air, and naval forces to European allies, while outlining how the United States should manage its unique capabilities in the region. It also addresses how Washington can demonstrate trust in its allies by transferring leadership responsibilities and preventing

bureaucratic resistance by framing retrenchment as strategic realignment rather than abandonment.

Ground Forces

Washington should initiate its posture shift in Europe by immediately withdrawing all rotational and surge forces. This step would remove roughly 20,000 ground troops, primarily from the two BCTs and one headquarters element deployed to Germany and eastern European states following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This drawdown would reduce the overall U.S. troop presence in Europe to approximately 60,000, returning it to levels consistent to where it was in the 2010s. To cement this change, Washington should cancel any scheduled or anticipated deployments of future rotational brigades to Europe.

The remaining 60,000 U.S. personnel, primarily permanently stationed troops, should then be assessed to determine which roles are essential to U.S. strategic interests, such as nuclear command and high-end intelligence functions, and which can be transitioned to European allies. Positions that do not directly contribute to these core strategic interests should be classified as "nonessential" and reduced by 50 percent within the first three years as responsibilities shift to European forces. Non-strategic functions such as base operations, support roles, and logistics should then be fully transferred to host nations within five years.

The immediate withdrawal of rotational and surge forces would affect several units that deployed to Europe in the fall of 2025, including the 4th Combat Aviation Brigade, the 4th Sustainment Brigade and the 3rd Division Artillery Brigade.³⁵ U.S. forces added to the expanded eastern European battlegroups established in 2022, particularly in Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland, would also be sent home.³⁶ National Guard units assigned to the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine and supporting Operation Atlantic Resolve would be withdrawn.³⁷ Removing these units now would act as a catalyst for European allies to assume responsibility for their own defense positions and would yield substantial strategic and fiscal benefits for the United States. Notably, MIT professor Barry Posen estimated the budgetary savings of shedding the conventional deterrence mission in Europe at \$70 to \$80 billion per year.³⁸

Air & Naval Forces

Alongside reductions in ground forces, the United States should immediately scale back portions of its air and naval presence in Europe that do not align with U.S. strategic priorities. At present, the United States maintains seven fighter squadrons across the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy. In May 2025, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Gen. David Allvin, informed the Senate Committee on Armed Services that the U.S. Air Force plans to return two F-15E Strike Eagles squadrons from RAF Lakenheath, England to the United States in order to “free up resources for its future modernization plans”.³⁹ Even with this drawdown, the United Kingdom will still host two F-35 squadrons stationed at RAF Lakenheath.

Rather than replacing the departing F-15E squadrons with additional F-35s or F-15EXs, Washington should allow the withdrawal to stand. The absence of a clear replacement timeline already suggests that these squadrons are not essential to U.S. strategic interests in Europe. To further demonstrate commitment to retrenchment, the United States should also withdraw one of its two F-16 squadrons stationed at Aviano Air Base in Italy.⁴⁰ By not replacing the F-15E squadrons in the United Kingdom and by removing an additional F-16 squadron from Italy, the U.S. can credibly signal its intent to reduce its European footprint while refitting these older fighter models for needs that may arise in other parts of the world.

When considering naval retrenchment, the United States should prioritize reducing its forward naval presence in the Mediterranean and shifting primary responsibility for the region’s security to European allies. The Mediterranean is bordered almost entirely by U.S. allies, features narrow and easily defensible maritime chokepoints, and holds far greater economic significance for Europe than for the United States. Approximately 40% of Europe’s trade with Asia transits the Red Sea and Suez Canal, compared to just 3% for the United States.⁴¹ Given these dynamics, it is more consistent with U.S. strategic interests for European allies to take the lead in monitoring and securing the Mediterranean while Washington reallocates its naval assets toward higher-priority regions, like in the Indo-Pacific.

To enable this shift, the United States should reduce

the number of destroyers stationed in Europe. Following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, four additional destroyers were deployed from U.S. homeports to supplement the four already based in Rota, Spain.⁴² As of June 2025, at least one of these destroyers, the USS *The Sullivans*, was operating in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁴³ As part of a broader retrenchment strategy, Washington should recall all destroyers deployed in response to the 2022 Russia–Ukraine war and withdraw an additional two missile destroyers from Europe. This would reduce the U.S. naval presence in the region by roughly half, returning it to levels comparable to those in 2014 and reinforcing the shift toward a more restrained, ally-led security posture.⁴⁴

Additional US Capabilities

In addition to its permanently stationed naval forces in the Mediterranean, the United States regularly deploys carrier strike groups, such as the USS Gerald R. Ford, that dock in or sail through the region. Maintaining this presence offers a way for Washington to demonstrate continued commitment to NATO’s defensive mission even as it retrenches its other capabilities in the region. A carrier strike group provides a flexible, offshore posture; it is relatively secure while located in the Mediterranean, can be rapidly repositioned as needed, and enhances U.S. readiness to respond to crises in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. For these reasons, the United States should retain carrier strike group deployments in the Mediterranean, even as it reduces other naval assets in the region.

The United States should suspend the planned deployment of any Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF) units that were set to be deployed in Europe in 2026 and withdraw any comparable U.S. offensive strike systems currently stationed in Europe. Long-range fires and other offensive-oriented capabilities, such as the proposed MDTF deployments, are unnecessary for a defensive posture, risk escalating tensions with Russia, and deepen U.S. military entanglement on the continent beyond what U.S. strategic interests require.

Defensive capabilities that advance U.S. strategic interests and reinforce NATO’s defensive mission should remain in Europe. In particular, the United States should continue to station its current nuclear

deterrent on the continent. Maintaining U.S. B61 gravity bombs in Europe shortens response times in the event of a crisis and serves as a stabilizing deterrent against potential Russian aggression toward NATO allies. The continued deployment of these weapons complements the existing French and British nuclear arsenals and provides reassurance during the transition to a reduced U.S. conventional presence, without requiring large numbers of U.S. personnel.

Crucially, the authority to use these weapons should remain exclusively with Washington. Their continued presence in Europe increases strategic ambiguity for Moscow by forcing Russian planners to account for the potential response of three nuclear-armed states rather than two should they attempt to exploit their sole relative advantage compared to Europe, their nuclear arsenal. Maintaining this additional layer of deterrence reduces the likelihood that Russia would interpret U.S. conventional retrenchment as an opportunity for aggression, no matter how remote that prospect is, given its relative weakness compared to Europe as explained earlier.

Setting the Narrative

The greatest obstacle to U.S. retrenchment from Europe lies in Washington's deep bureaucratic entanglement within NATO, which has fostered European dependence on U.S. capabilities for continental defense. As the United States undertakes the necessary task of reducing its military presence, it should also transfer NATO's bureaucratic and operational command responsibilities to European allies. Washington should further encourage the development of a robust European defense infrastructure by ending informal pressure on allies to purchase U.S. weapons systems.

Transferring the SACEUR position to a European NATO officer would help cultivate the sense of ownership required for European countries to assume responsibility for their own defense. Such a move would also serve as a powerful signal of U.S. confidence in its allies, allowing Europe to coordinate the defense of its region while reducing the bureaucratic constraints Washington would otherwise face in withdrawing most of its conventional forces. Continuing to claim operational leadership while expecting Europeans to replace the United States

as the primary security guarantor would only undermine retrenchment and prolong dependency. Allowing European allies to employ and procure their own defense systems would reinforce recent increases in defense investment as seen in countries such as Germany, Poland, and France. It would also help accelerate Europe's ability to assume full responsibility for continental security.

As the United States retrenches militarily, it should proactively counter claims of European abandonment by strengthening U.S.–Europe cooperation through non-military channels, such as diplomacy, trade, and defense intelligence sharing. As troop levels decline, Washington should deepen political and economic ties, its primary strategic interests on the continent, while expanding high-end intelligence cooperation to help both sides manage their respective security priorities. Increased transatlantic trade, greater alignment on issues such as data governance, and expanded access for U.S. technology firms in underdeveloped European markets could be mutually beneficial. These steps would bolster Europe's capacity to provide for its own security while preserving U.S. influence on the continent, mitigating concerns that American leverage would disappear alongside a reduced military presence.

Conclusion

Taken together, this paper's recommendations offer a holistic and strategically sound path for U.S. retrenchment from Europe that preserves deterrence, returns NATO to its original defensive mission, and restores American strategic flexibility. With an immediate withdrawal of rotational and surge forces, cutting current air and naval units in half, and the transfer of nonessential responsibilities to European allies, Washington can correct decades of distorted burden-sharing without undermining European regional security. Retaining defensive capabilities, like its nuclear deterrence and flexible offshore Carrier Strike Groups, ensures continued U.S. engagement in the NATO alliance while avoiding unnecessary entanglement.

At the same time, reforming NATO's command structure and reshaping the narrative around retrenchment as trust rather than abandonment would incentivize Europe to assume full responsibility for

its own defense. In an era of shifting global priorities and intensifying competition elsewhere, a leaner U.S. posture in Europe is not a retreat, but a necessary recalibration that aligns commitments with the realities of threats and allows both the United States and Europe to emerge more capable, resilient, and strategically autonomous.

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