

Development And Implications Of The European Deterrence Initiative

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ABSTRACT

The recent shift in geopolitics towards renewed great power competition, demonstrated by Russian actions in Ukraine, caused the United States to undertake a new program to assure NATO alliance members and deter further Russian actions. This paper covers the development, implementation, and adaptation of that U.S. effort, dubbed the European Deterrence Initiative. The history of this program paints a story of crisis and response on both sides of the Atlantic. With the U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force all contributing plans and resources, the United States military charted a hasty path towards stability on the Eastern flank of NATO. The subsequent budgetary, political, and operational developments of the European Deterrence Initiative provide a valuable case study of contemporary U.S. strategies to meet near-peer competitors. Across both the Obama and Trump administrations, the program has had the effect of reaffirming the longstanding American policy of solidarity and commitment to European security. By continuing the European Deterrence Initiative at current funding levels for the near term, the United States can stabilize and reinvigorate the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance as a cornerstone of its global security strategy.

INTRODUCTION

In early June 2014, President Obama stood in Warsaw with President Komorowski of Poland and announced a major U.S. foreign policy initiative. The United States would embark upon a new effort to bolster the security of NATO allies by pre-positioning additional equipment in Europe and expanding exercises and training with allies to increase readiness.¹ This new program, christened the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) in late 2014, represented

substantial U.S. investment in the defense of Europe, to an unprecedented level since the end of the Cold War.

The events leading up to that summer 2014 announcement started in the winter of the previous year. The ousting of the government of Victor Yanukovych by pro-European Union segments of the Ukrainian population during the Euromaidan triggered a series of responses in Moscow, Washington, and European capitals. These reverberations were the primary impetus for the new U.S. program. However, the story of ERI, currently known as the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), is more than a reaction to Russian actions. EDI's development, implementation, and adaptation over the past four years has had a significant impact on U.S. military posture in Europe and encouraged broader stability within the transatlantic relationship.

Careful analysis of EDI yields insights on both current and future U.S. commitment to European security. What factors led to the implementation of the initiative, and why was it needed? How has it changed since its inception, and what drove those changes? What is the current status of the program, and what are its prospects in the near future? By working through these questions, a better understanding is gained about the transatlantic relationship. Although ERI began as an immediate response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, it evolved into something more complex over the past several years: a clear response to doubts over U.S. commitment to NATO and European security.

THE GENESIS OF THE EUROPEAN REASSURANCE INITIATIVE: PERSISTENT PRESENCE & INITIAL ACTIONS

Months prior to President Obama's announcement, a response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine was already in development. General Phillip Breedlove, filling the dual role as both commander of United States European Command (EUCOM) and Supreme Allied Commander of NATO (SACEUR), coordinated the U.S. military response in the spring of 2014. He directed his subordinate American commands in Europe to plan immediate actions that had one clear initial goal: assure the Baltic States and Poland that the U.S. would defend their sovereignty. Such assurances were especially critical for the Baltic States given the recent history of Russian incursions into other former-Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia. Within Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, there were growing fears that Western European members of NATO would hesitate to come to their assistance in the event of conflict with Russia.² At that point, the most likely threat to the health of NATO was disunity within the alliance rather than direct Russian action. General Breedlove, leveraging U.S. resources available via EUCOM, was thus able to shore up NATO. Those U.S. efforts, coordinated bilaterally between EUCOM and each of the Baltic States and

Poland, relied upon presence to deliver reassurance to NATO's most exposed members. This core purpose reflected in the name of the operation; "Persistent Presence" began in earnest in April 2014.³

The majority of Persistent Presence requirements fell to the United States Army in Europe (USAREUR) and its commander, Lieutenant General Ben Hodges. USAREUR deployed companies of paratroopers from the 173rd Infantry Brigade to the Baltics and Poland for the remainder of 2014, rotating troops every three months. Overall, the number of American ground troops rotating to the region steadied at around a Battalion's strength of 600 personnel at any one time. The United States Air Force in Europe (USAFE) increased F-15 and F-16 Fighter contributions to the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission, more than doubling the American contribution to the ongoing operation. Additionally, over the course of 2014, the U.S. Navy deployed several Arleigh Burke class destroyers to improve naval interoperability, increase readiness, and develop professional relationships with allies.⁴ These deployments of American warships represented an increased contribution beyond the existing the Standing NATO Maritime Group.

However, these immediate actions put a tremendous strain on the U.S. forces stationed in Europe physically and fiscally. From the beginning of the initiative, General Breedlove began messaging the difficulty of sustaining Persistent Presence with existing resources to the U.S. political leadership. The downward trend of U.S. forces and funding within Europe since the end of the Cold War had left the military in Europe stretched thin by 2014. "We may need to add additional rotational forces to cover the sustained and persistent presence that we are now envisioning," Breedlove told reporters during a visit to Washington in June 2014. EUCOM as a whole had seen significant cuts, and General Breedlove took many opportunities to publicly remind the Obama Administration and the Pentagon of his concerns:

*"At the height of the Cold War, the United States had more than 400,000 soldiers assigned to Europe; today, there are fewer than 100,000 soldiers assigned to the continent, and 35,000 of them are on rotational deployments. Indeed, even when combined with the forces of NATO, the United States' military presence on the continent would be hard-pressed to deter a determined Russia."*⁵

In 2014, the imbalance between new threats and existing resources came to a head. General Breedlove was especially concerned with the manning and funding levels within his Army component, USAREUR. Since the end of the Cold War, USAREUR had drawn down from a force of approximately 200,000

to around 33,000, with funding levels proportionally decreasing as well.⁶ Of greatest concern, the last Army tank brigade left the continent in late 2013, leaving USAREUR with only one wheeled Stryker brigade and one light infantry airborne brigade. Despite these conditions, the American military in Europe attempted to reassure the eastern members of NATO while maintaining their existing commitments for annual training and maintenance. As the Russian intervention in Ukraine continued to ramp up and the threat towards the Baltics persisted, EUCOM needed a more permanent solution for forces, funding, and direction.

INITIAL EUROPEAN REASSURANCE INITIATIVE GOALS

Driven by public and private concerns from his senior military leaders in Europe, the Obama administration took action. Based on recommendations from EUCOM and the Pentagon, the President made his announcement of ERI in June 2014: “We’ll increase the number of American personnel – Army and Air Force units – continuously rotating through allied countries in Central and Eastern Europe. And we will be stepping up our partnerships with friends like Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as they provide for their own defense. I’m calling on Congress to approve up to \$1 billion to support this effort, which will be a powerful demonstration of America’s unshakeable commitment to our NATO allies.”⁷ The fiscal year 2015 budget request from the President to Congress included \$1 billion for ERI in the overseas contingency operations fund.⁸

Within that proposal, the Obama administration sought funding along five lines of effort. \$440 million was allotted to increase forces rotating to Europe. This included ground forces for the rotations in the Baltics and Poland, Air Force fighters, and an expanded naval presence in the Baltic and Black seas. \$250 million was allotted for improved infrastructure projects across Central and Eastern European NATO members, which supported the increased troop presence and training needs. \$125 million was allotted for the pre-positioning of equipment in Eastern Europe, including equipment for Marines in Norway. \$75 million funded expanded participation in military exercises and training with NATO allies and partners. Finally, the request included \$35 million for the Department of Defense and \$75 million for the Department of State to “build partner capacity” in NATO member and partner countries via training and gifting of equipment.⁹ This billion-dollar infusion did much to address the imbalance between resources and requirements in Europe.

ERI DEVELOPMENTS IN 2014-16

With these funding proposals approved by Congress and signed by President Obama in December 2014, EUCOM then had the capability to both

sustain existing efforts and expand them during 2015. The approval of ERI coincided with the renaming of the American assurance mission in late 2014. The new name, Operation Atlantic Resolve (OAR), reflected the “operational” nature of the mission and espoused the Atlanticism inherent in assurance. OAR’s mandate expanded from Persistent Presence in several key areas. It funded the rotation of an armored Brigade Combat Team and a brigade of Army helicopters to support rotations in the Baltics and Poland, representing a significant improvement in the credibility and capability of the American forces.¹⁰ Additionally, the new funding supported rotating division level headquarters to Europe, allowing better command and control of the increased activity from the continent itself. These expansions didn’t change the core purpose of the mission to “...reassure NATO allies and partners of America’s dedication to enduring peace and stability in the region in light of the Russian intervention in Ukraine.”¹¹

These U.S. actions set the stage for a heightened summer exercise calendar across Europe. This resulted in over thirty major training events, some of which were new and some which had been expanded upon from previous iterations.¹² Additionally, the fiscal year 2015 ERI funding supported the enlargement of the ongoing assurance mission. Initially covering the Baltic NATO members of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Poland, OAR expanded into the Central European NATO members of Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria. The 2015 expansion created two distinct geographic regions, labelled “Atlantic Resolve-North” (OAR-N) for the Baltics and Poland, and “Atlantic Resolve-South” (OAR-S) covering Central Europe.

OAR’s air component consisted of increased rotations of the USAFE tactical squadrons to Europe, forward deployed in the Baltics and Poland. Initially, a six-month rotation of F-15C/D fighters began in April 2015 in Estonia, Bulgaria, and Hungary. Following rotations incorporated A-10C Warthog, F-16C Fighters, and various transport aircraft, which participated in numerous exercises with their allied NATO air forces. Additionally, these aircraft more than doubled American participation in the enduring NATO Baltic air policing mission and provided support to expanded exercises across Europe. In an unprecedented show of force, the USAFE deployed the advanced F-22 Raptor to Europe for the first time with ERI funding.¹³

By mid-2015, the fiscal year 2016 budgeting cycle began again, and the ERI and OAR continued to receive consistent support from the Obama administration and Congress. Although ERI was originally intended to be a one-year effort, the President’s budget for fiscal year 2016 requested \$789 million for ERI within the overseas contingency operation budget. This decrease in funding, while not insignificant, had little impact on the ongoing mission. ERI continued the expansions begun in 2015 and enjoyed strong bipartisan support in Congress.¹⁴

Throughout 2014 and 2015, ERI focused on assuring allies of American commitment to their security. However, 2016 signaled a transition in emphasis away from internal assurance towards external deterrence of Russia. In a March 2016 statement in Latvia, General Breedlove laid out the future for ERI: “Our current funding request for the European Reassurance Initiative would significantly expand on our ERI efforts to date. If approved, our ERI request would expand our focus from assurance to deterrence, including measures that vastly improve our overall readiness.”¹⁵ That expansion and refocusing was only possible due to a significant increase in ERI funding by the Obama administration.

The President’s fiscal year 2017 budget quadrupled funding for ERI to \$3.4 billion. That massive increase was an acknowledgement by the Obama administration of the growing Russian threat to long-term U.S. security interests in Europe. The new funding allowed for the rotational armored brigade, aviation brigade, support units, and division headquarters to have a constant presence in Europe. Under the previous years’ planning and budgeting, those expensive forces rotated to the U.S. periodically, leaving short gaps in presence.

Further, the increase in funding allowed the U.S. Army to deepen the stock of prepositioned equipment in Western Europe. An entire heavy brigade’s worth of equipment would come to Europe for contingency use, with broad implications for the military, as assessed by a Center for Strategic and International Studies report on ERI: “That action indicated that the [Department of Defense] chose to sacrifice some of its strategic flexibility—or ability to deploy globally by keeping the equipment at home—in favor of heightened readiness to respond to a crisis in the European theater. All of this indicates that the Defense Department is more serious about the defense of Europe and settling in for what they see as an enduring new reality vis-à-vis Russia.” The message to allies, partners, and competitors was clear: the U.S. was renewing its physical and financial commitment to the security of Europe.¹⁶

If the shift from assurance to deterrence was the message of 2016, then Exercise Anakonda 2016 was its exclamation point. Under the initiative of USAREUR’s commander, Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, a majority of the personnel in USAREUR participated in a massive series of exercises that summer. These exercises were interconnected under the overall banner of Anakonda 2016, co-hosted by Poland and the U.S. Army. Comprising over 31,000 soldiers from 24 NATO members and partners, the exercise represented the largest such endeavor by the U.S. since the end of the Cold War.¹⁷ ERI was the primary method for funding this unprecedented series of exercises, which would have otherwise been impossible.

ERI IN 2017-18 UNDER THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

The fiscal year 2017 funding request for ERI was the last iteration overseen by the Obama administration. The election of Donald Trump in November of 2016 cast doubt over continued American spending on European security. Political and military leaders on both sides of the Atlantic heard the anti-NATO campaign rhetoric from Trump – typified by comments on burden sharing – dimming their expectations for funding for ERI in fiscal year 2018.¹⁸ As 2017 unfolded, however, the bottom failed to drop out of ERI funding. On the contrary, the administration's actions not only continued support for ERI but actually increased funding for the program. Along with this increase, the Department of Defense under President Trump officially renamed the initiative to the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI). Driven by USAREUR and EUCOM's shift in focus the year prior, the name now accurately reflected the program's intent.

President Trump requested \$4.7 billion for EDI from contingency funding in his budget proposal for fiscal year 2018. Specifically, the increase in the budget request allowed for construction of infrastructure and support facilities to handle increased rotations of American ground forces (an increase of \$120 million from 2017), as well as paying for those forces themselves (an increase of \$700 million). Additionally, it allowed for an expansion of the efforts to pre-position fuel, ammunition, and equipment across Europe, an increase of \$320 million.¹⁹ Conclusively, the new administration supported Department of Defense and EUCOM proposals to accelerate the growth of the American military presence in Europe.

EDI funding, when compared to similar funding requests for other U.S. military operations, provides some perspective on the priority of the NATO Alliance to the U.S. EDI represented 13.5% of the Trump administration's overseas contingency operations budget request of \$64.6 billion in comparison to the 20% (\$13 billion) for operations in Iraq and Syria against ISIS (Operation Inherent Resolve) and 71% (\$45.9 billion) for operations in Afghanistan (Operation Freedom's Sentinel).²⁰ However, EDI signified a mission of deterrence, not an active combat operation like the other two major operations funded within the overseas contingency operations budget. That a deterrence mission should be given such a large portion of funding relative to ongoing combat operations demonstrates its strategic importance to the U.S.

In an acknowledgement of this apparent mislabeling, the U.S. Congress sought to shift funding for EDI in fiscal year 2018 from overseas contingency operations to the base-operating budget of the Department of Defense. This move by Congress affirmed the importance of the NATO Alliance. The Senate Armed Services Committee articulated this perspective within their commentary on the 2018 Defense budget, calling EDI an

“...enduring function that belongs in the base [Defense] budget.” Moving EDI from overseas contingency operations was “...part of a broader effort to use [overseas contingency operations funding] for its intended purpose in funding temporary war-fighting expenditures rather than for functions traditionally and properly supported through the base budget.”²¹

The budgeting move also signaled a re-prioritization of EDI by Congress; funding the program through the base budget removed much of the unpredictability associated with the overseas contingency operations budget.²² EDI ranked as an equal to other similar line items within the base budget for fiscal year 2018. Comparable efforts to train, equip, and build partner military capacity received equal or lesser funding than EDI. Of note in the 2018 budget, the Senate authorized \$1.8 billion in funding for counter-ISIS efforts via the “train and equip” programs in Iraq and Syria, \$4.9 billion for the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund, and \$705 million for Israeli cooperative missile defense programs.²³

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN EDI

From the beginning of ERI through its development into EDI, EUCOM and the Department of Defense have repeatedly called for a growth in the permanent size of USAREUR by adding another brigade of ground forces and a brigade of army aviation. EDI funding in 2018 would allow EUCOM to meet those force requirements. The high cost and long lead times for rotating large units to Europe had been a constriction on the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the deterrence mission. In 2016, the National Commission on the Future of the Army reported to Congress and the President that increased permanent forces assigned to Europe were imperative. They concluded that the existing practice of rotating aviation and armored brigade combat teams was less effective than permanent basing.²⁴ This opinion was echoed in a 2016 CSIS report:

“an armored brigade and aviation brigade should be permanently assigned to Europe, given the need and high-costs associated with continuously rotating these forces from the United States.”²⁵

Although EDI had set the conditions for additional forces to permanently re-join USAREUR, General Breedlove believed the Department of Defense could do more, “As for what form this ramped-up presence should take, the U.S. should preposition the equipment for two or three additional armored brigades in Eastern Europe, along with the supplies to sustain those forces through at least two months of intense conflict.”²⁶ Such a buildup would allow the U.S. Army to stage equipment forward without housing the accompanying

soldiers in costly European living arrangements. In the event of conflict or increased tension, the soldiers of those units would travel from their home bases in the U.S. and fall in upon their vehicles and weapons in Europe.

General Breedlove's successor as Commander of EUCOM, General Curtis Scaparrotti, shared this position during his 2016 congressional confirmation hearings saying he understood the challenges given resource limitations but believed "a permanently stationed armored brigade in Europe would be best... [because it] establishes relationships with the supporting elements of all forces from the United States as well as a more permanent and lasting relationship with all of our allies. That can be done over time better than a rotational force can potentially do it."²⁷ Regardless of the size of the increase or its timeline for execution, there is a strong possibility that some or all of that effort could be funded through EDI.

Another increasingly important aspect of EDI is the U.S. support to NATO deterrence efforts. The renaming from European Reassurance Initiative to EDI reflected an American desire to reinvigorate the alliance towards collective deterrence in lieu of continued bilateral assurance measures used up to that point. Coinciding with this shift in assuring allies to deterring external threats, NATO held the Warsaw Summit in September 2016. At that summit, the North Atlantic Council decided to move forward with a NATO operation similar to the American efforts under OAR.

The Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP), announced following the Warsaw summit, represented a new NATO effort to collectively deter Russian actions. Beginning in June 2017, NATO began its forward presence in the eastern part of the Alliance, with four multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, on a rotational basis. These battlegroups, led by the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and the United States respectively, were composed of combat formations capable of high-intensity warfare using armor, artillery, and engineers.²⁸ EFP represented an improvement in size and capability from previous efforts under OAR. Earlier U.S. initiatives to develop infrastructure for housing of personnel, improvements in training areas, and increased equipment, ammunition, and fuel storage to support OAR ended up facilitating later Enhanced Forward Presence deployments. Additionally, the U.S. battlegroup participating in EFP was partially paid for by ERI funds.²⁹ As EFP continues for the foreseeable future, the program will continue to reap the benefits of this funding; the 2019 budget proposal from the Department of Defense allocated \$225 million to the NATO mission.³⁰ Thus, the continuation of EDI and the success of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence are inexorably linked.

AN INDICATOR OF TRANSATLANTIC HEALTH

Stemming from statements made by then-candidate and later President Donald Trump in 2016 and early 2017, many assumed that this renewed American investment in European security under EDI would taper off. In an ominous tweet from April 2016, President Trump labeled the NATO alliance “obsolete,” and similarly antagonistic rhetoric littered the campaign trail.³¹ This hostility and skepticism directed towards the alliance culminated in the May 2017 trip to Brussels for the NATO summit, where the President declined to directly mention the United States’ Article V commitments.³² Article V is the “mutual defense” clause under the North Atlantic Treaty, and requires the U.S. to treat an attack on a NATO ally as an attack on the U.S. itself. Over the past year of his administration, however, President Trump has tempered his tone on NATO. His administration chose to fund EDI through consecutive budgeting cycles, indicating an American commitment to European security.

Indeed, the United States’ underlying commitment to Europe was evident to at least one leading European politician. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, ahead of the conference in Brussels, stated:

“I welcome yesterday’s budget proposal to significantly increase the [American] presence in Europe with more troops, infrastructure, and exercises.”

Despite President Trump’s deliberate omission of the U.S. commitments under Article V, the Secretary General of NATO made a deeper observation on the U.S. position:

“Yesterday, the Trump administration presented a budget where they increase funding for [American] military presence in Europe by forty percent, which is a significant increase which comes on top of the increase we saw last year. So after many years of a decline in [American] military presence in Europe we now see for the first time in many years an increase [...] so this is a commitment to our collective defense from the United States not only in words but also in deeds.”³³

The Secretary General saw past the political rhetoric of a populist politician appealing to his base; he followed the money to reveal the United States’ long-term position.

Domestically, both houses of the U.S. Congress continued to openly support ERI and now EDI in 2018. Congress’s recent actions have moved

towards securing EDI funding in future defense budgets. As the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan continue, competition for funding and forces will remain. However, recent legislative and executive actions have proven that, even during major competing threats and issues around the globe, Europe remains at the heart of the U.S. interests. During these last four years, we have seen ERI develop from an immediate response to allies' uncertainty and Russian actions into EDI: an unequivocal answer on American solidarity with Europe.

THE FUTURE OF EDI

The current policy of the U.S. has gone a long way to assure allies within NATO, while simultaneously deterring further Russian adventurism in Europe. Despite competing budget requirements and military threats, the Trump administration should continue the current policy and funding for EDI for the next several years. The U.S. is entering a critical phase of investment into its military posture in Europe, and some allies still have reservations about American commitment to NATO. Steady funding and political support over the near-term will solidify our Allies' confidence and complete our European force posture improvements.

For fiscal year 2019, the Department of Defense proposed a 36 percent increase in funding for EDI.³⁴ This increase can support two new developments: increasing permanently stationed American units in Europe and expansion of support for NATO-led deterrence activities. Both actions herald a long-term U.S. commitment. The significance of permanent stationing of units in Europe and allocation of funds towards long-term infrastructure projects will not be lost on our allies, partners, and competitors in Europe.

The importance of a stable and secure Europe to the U.S. is clear. The two are inextricably linked, both economically and politically. The European Union is United States' largest trading partner, and together the two represent a majority of the world's gross domestic product. The \$5.5 trillion in annual trade requires stability, confidence, and security to sustain growth. Regardless of competing economic and security concerns in the Pacific, the U.S. exports four times the amount of goods to Europe than it does to China. Europe represents the United States' most lucrative relationship; the security provided by NATO is the underlying foundation for that prosperity.

Despite the past four years of EDI funding, some European allies continue to doubt the U.S. commitment to European security. Due in no small part to trade negotiations and friction between the U.S. and the European Union, France and Germany have reinvigorated the call for independent European military capability outside the framework of NATO. The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiative within the European Union could potentially

compliment and augment NATO capabilities, but would surely overlap with existing NATO efforts. Such initiatives ultimately waste limited European defense budgets on redundant command hierarchies, military capabilities, and acquisitions programs. Political support for PESCO within the European Union stems from the doubt of American support for European security. These reservations can be significantly reduced through steady American actions in the face of hyperbolic political rhetoric. The U.S. can silence these initiatives for independent European military forces through continuation of the funding for EDI.

Steady funding for EDI over the next several years will secure the effect the U.S. seeks: assuring our allies of NATO's stability and deterring our Russian competitors from aggressive actions in Europe. The modest cost of EDI, relative to other major operations and programs around the globe, will help to secure America's most valuable economic and political relationship and calm our allies' insecurities. The transatlantic bond, dating back to the foundations of our nation, should be a major priority for the Trump Administration and our military during this time of renewed global competition. Our security and prosperity depend on it.

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