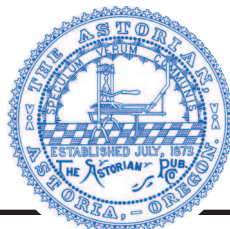


OPINION



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PRO-CON



Should US keep forward base in Poland to deter Russia?

AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski

The first U.S. troops arrive in 2017 at the Zagan base in western Poland as part of a deterrence force of some 1,000 soldiers.

PRO: US base in Poland flashes hands-off signal to Putin

WASHINGTON — In the 1950s, NATO war planners pondered how to defend the nascent alliance against the Soviet war machine. On paper, the magnitude of the threat looked overwhelming.

Wargaming showed that British and U.S. forces would be unable to stop a Soviet incursion in the east. The best option: consolidate our forces at the beaches at Normandy, where the Allies had first come ashore in 1944 and strengthen their position as much as possible before the Soviet troops arrived. Then ... hold on.

That plan was rejected. After all, what nation would commit to an alliance that would leave all or even most of their territory at the mercy of foreign invaders?

Instead, the NATO planners decided they would conduct a forward defense. They would man the frontlines of the alliance.

That decision accomplished two goals. First, it deterred aggression by telling Moscow that the entire alliance was willing to defend NATO soil.

Second, it forced the alliance to develop the infrastructure and logistics needed to support and reinforce the frontline troops.

And it worked. Throughout the Cold War, NATO fielded enough conventional forces — ships, planes, and soldiers — that Moscow never crossed the line.

The U.S. should learn from this experience as it considers Poland's request to permanently forward deploy American forces in their country.

To be fair, there are respectable arguments against building what that Polish President Andrzej Duda famously labeled "Fort Trump" when he pitched the idea to the U.S. president in September.

Retired Army General Ben Hodges, for example, worries about the risk of defending and supporting troops that close to Putin. And, he notes, it will be expensive to build the facilities — schools, commissaries, housing, etc. — needed to take care of military members and their families.

"There are other ways to deter Russia than to build permanent bases," Hodges argues.

Hodges' assessment makes sense, as did the initial assessment made by the 1950s NATO war planners.

Fort Trump would be a costly speed

bump to Russian aggression. But if the goal is to rebuild NATO's credibility as the real guarantor of trans-Atlantic security, flying the stars and stripes over Fort Trump might be exactly the right move to make.

There is an honest debate to be had about what the NATO footprint should look like, but there is no question NATO needs to move its frontline forward.

Committing to the forward defense of Poland, one of America's strongest and most trusted allies in Central Europe, would be an unmistakable hands-off sign for Putin.



JAMES JAY CARAFANO

Further, for NATO to demonstrate fully that it can defend Central Europe, the alliance will have to figure out how to extend its air and missile defense umbrella.

Moreover, they'll need to demonstrate they can control air-space, protect cyber and space systems, and move supplies and reinforcements quickly in time of crisis.

A base in Poland will force NATO to address these issues sooner rather later. That's a good thing.

And it will give the Trump administration even more authority when pressing allies to boost their defense spending to what's expected of NATO members — about 2 percent of their gross domestic products — so they have the capacity they require to fight forward.

Of course, Fort Trump by itself cannot guarantee peace on the continent. Russia already has fielded medium-range nuclear missiles that can hit every European capital.

It is highly unlikely that the U.S. will field its own intermediate-range nuclear missiles to offset that threat. Instead, the Pentagon will likely deploy highly lethal conventional weapons that can hold key Russian targets at risk.

Forward-deployed forces would benefit from that extended conventional umbrella — making forward forces like Fort Trump more survivable.

In short, moving forward gives America and its allies every advantage and sends a stronger signal to Vladimir Putin — that he should keep his hands off Western Europe.

James Jay Carafano is a 25-year Army veteran and a Heritage Foundation vice president who directs the think tank's research into issues of national security.

CON: Only reason for being is to reap profits for America's weapons makers

WASHINGTON — Dangle a couple billion dollars in front of Donald Trump — who seems to see himself as America's premier arms merchant, when he's not using the presidency to make money for himself and family — and you can see his eyes light up.

"Fort Trump," we will call it, suggested Poland's President Andrzej Duda, who knows how to manipulate an insatiable ego.

Trump responded positively: "Poland would be paying billions of dollars for a base, and we are looking at that."

But even some of the more hawkish military analysts, such as Ben Hodges, commander of U.S. Army Europe from 2014 to 2017, have argued that this is "unnecessarily provocative." The idea was roundly rejected by the U.S. and Germany when it was first suggested in 2016.

If the power of the weapons industry were to prevail, however, it wouldn't be the first time.

In fact, that's a big part of the story of how we got in this New Cold War in the first place. As the New York Times pointed out: "At night, Bruce L. Jackson is president of the U.S. Committee to Expand NATO, giving intimate dinners for senators and foreign officials. By day, he is director of strategic planning for Lockheed Martin Corporation, the world's biggest weapons maker."

That was 1997. Two years later, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic would join NATO, allowing America's weapon makers to haul in billions of dollars in new arms sales. Ten more countries would join over the next nine years, bringing NATO's military to Russia's doorstep.

The United States and Germany promised Russia in 1990, as the Soviet Union was collapsing, that they would not expand NATO even "an inch" to the east.

Although many Americans have forgotten World War II, the Russians have not: They lost 27 million people to Nazi invaders.

Needless to say, they are not fond of the violent neo-Nazis that the U.S. government has supported in Ukraine, or the idea that Ukraine could end up with

the next NATO military base on their border.

These are the most important structural causes of the New Cold War, not Russia's annexation of Crimea — which violated international law — or Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Americans are understandably upset about any foreign interference in our elections. As are Hondurans, Chileans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, Italians, Iranians and citizens of scores

of other countries where the United States has intervened much more heavily — sometimes sponsoring military coups to reverse election results.

This even includes Russia itself, where Americans organized and spent heavily to elect their ally, Boris Yeltsin, in 1996.

Election expert Nate Silver noted this week that Russian troll farms, memes and tweets were much too small and without evidence of effectiveness to have made a difference in the 2016 election.

But in any case, the New Cold War with Russia has deeper structural causes that will not be resolved through sanctions and threats — and certainly not by expanding NATO's military encirclement of Russia.

Ironically, despite Trump's personal friendliness with Putin — and whatever private financial gains he has sought there — he has been more aggressive toward Russia through stepped-up sanctions, sending lethal weapons to Ukraine, proposing to abandon the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces treaty and continuing to expand NATO.

This is no way to manage relations between the two countries that have the vast majority of the world's nuclear weapons.

Of course even talking about our new military base in Poland shows how far U.S. foreign policy towards Russia has descended into stupidity and recklessness.

It will take much more public awareness and political mobilization to reverse course.

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