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US to Station Armoured Brigade in Eastern Europe in 2017

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The US will increase its military presence in Eastern Europe by deploying an additional armored brigade, the US military said on March 30. «*This army implementation plan continues to demonstrate our strong and balanced approach to reassuring our NATO allies and partners in the wake of an aggressive Russia in Eastern Europe and elsewhere*», General Philip Breedlove, the top US commander in Europe, said in a statement.

«*As part of the US commitment to increased assurance and deterrence*», US Army Europe will begin receiving continuous troop rotations of US-based armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs) to the European theater in early 2017, bringing the total Army presence in Europe up to three fully-manned Army brigades, US European Command officials said.

As discussed during the announcement of the fiscal year 2017 European Reassurance Initiative budget proposal, the Army has decided to begin storing static equipment, known as Army pre-positioned stocks, within Europe for contingency operations. The service will repair and upgrade its already pre-positioned arms and place them at sites in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. Those stocks will be sufficient for another armored brigade to fall in on. The rotating brigade will bring its own equipment. The move will add hundreds of the Army's most advanced weapons systems to beef up the European Command's combat capability. It will also free up an

entire brigade's worth of weapons currently being used by American forces training on the continent to enable more US troops to be rushed in on short notice, if needed.

The rotation period will be limited to nine months. Two brigade combat teams are permanently stationed in Europe – the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team (ABCT) and the 2nd Cavalry Regiment (a brigade-sized unit).

An armored brigade combat team comprises about 4,200 troops and includes approximately 250 tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles and Paladin self-propelled howitzers, plus 1,750 wheeled vehicles.

The military has not disclosed where the rotational brigade will be stationed. This question will be included into the agenda of this summer's NATO summit in Warsaw.

The US military has about 62,000 permanently assigned service members in Europe.

The active Army only has nine ABCTs, and they already are tasked with nine-month rotations to Kuwait and South Korea to make the planned deployment a serious burden as the service faces its other overseas commitments.

The plans are in line with the decisions taken by a meeting of North Atlantic Council at the level of defence ministers held in Brussels on 10-11 February, 2016. The participants agreed on enhanced forward presence in the eastern part of the Alliance. NATO is to station additional soldiers in six member states in Eastern Europe as part of its anti-Russian strategy. The units would be small, but involved in possible deployment of the alliance's future «rapid response force». It could involve up to a battalion of 500-1,000 troops sent to each of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. The forces deployed on rotation will include highly-mobile special operations units armed with surface-to-air missiles backed up by ground-attack aircraft and helicopters. The biggest chunk of funding – \$2 billion – is for putting a «heel-to-toe» ABCT in theater (on top of the above mentioned Stryker brigade and infantry brigade already stationed permanently). The funding will also cover more aviation in theater.

Polish Defense Minister Antoni Macierewicz has said that talks about deploying American depots for heavy weaponry in Poland are already in progress.

«The US is preparing a network of various activities in which it is extremely important to deploy heavy weaponry in Poland and other countries», said Macierewicz.

But there is no unanimity inside NATO. For instance, Germany traditionally opposes the establishment of NATO military bases in Poland.

And Berlin wants the Russia-NATO cooperation to continue.

The plans are in violation of the Russia-NATO Founding Act (1997) – the only remaining pillar of European security. In that agreement, NATO pledged that, *«in the current and foreseeable security environment», it would not seek «additional permanent stationing of substantial ground combat forces»* in the nations closer to Russia.

More to that, in its recently released report, the National Commission on the Future of the Army went even further, recommending the Army permanently station an ABCT in Europe because of the *«changing security environment in Europe» and the region's «value as a stationing location for potential contingencies in the Middle East»*.

Nearly two decades later, the NATO-Russia Founding Act appears all but dead amid the alliance's push to beef up its military presence on its eastern flank.

In his comments on the US plans, Russian permanent representative at the alliance, Alexander Grushko, vowed a *«totally asymmetrical»* response if the alliance stands by a plan to deploy new armored units to Eastern Europe. *«We are not passive observers, we consistently take all the military measures we consider necessary in order to counterbalance this reinforced presence that is not justified by anything»*, he said.

«As of today, assessing as a whole what the US and NATO are doing, the point at issue is a substantial change for the worse in the security situation», the ambassador added.

At the same time, he said that bridges have not been burned between Russia and NATO, leaving the door open for restored cooperation – although he stressed that the alliance should end its policy of confrontation.

«Cooperation will be possible only when NATO countries start realizing that the policy of confrontation contradicts their own national interests», Grushko said. *«There are no technological barriers to this cooperation. We hope that sooner or later all the ties which we used to have, and which used to be effective, will be re-established and our cooperation will continue»*.

Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov told *Deutsche Welle* that Russia had no intention of sending troops to European countries, and urged mass media to stop spreading scare stories about the Russian military 'threat'. *«We should stop the spreading of these scary tales alleging that Russia intends to send tanks to the Baltic countries, to Sofia or Budapest. No one has any intention to do this. There are no such plans. Russia wants no war. Any statements that say that Russia intends to launch a war are simply ridiculous»*, the official said.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu said the deployment of NATO's forces near Russia's borders has caused concern.

As part of a response, he said, new units in the Western Military District, including two new divisions, will be formed.

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The US decision to increase military presence in Europe comes along with the rise of Donald Trump, who has disparaged the NATO alliance as a drain on US resources.

His stance has a lot of supporters in the US.

There are a lot of Americans who realize the negative consequences of US military presence overseas.

The deployment is strongly opposed in Europe where the countries hosting United States troops automatically become targets for retaliatory actions.

The decision is fraught with very serious implications. It will greatly reduce European security and reinforce the growing tensions between Russia and NATO. There is still time to oppose this scenario. US congressmen will become responsible for the consequences in case they approve the plans. They should think twice before the vote. Europeans can exert pressure on their respective governments before the next NATO summit takes place this July in Warsaw. The increase of US forces in Europe will plunge the continent into the quagmire of heightened tensions and uncontrolled arms race. All the previous efforts to make the continent a safer place will go down the drain.