

Germany's U.S. Troops

Removing 12,000 troops from Germany will likely mean several base closures and cost billions of dollars for an operation that could begin in weeks but take years to complete. The realignment, triggered by President Donald Trump's call to move some of the roughly 36,000 troops out of the country, would require significant spending, military officials said. Along with 5,600 troops heading to other bases in Europe under the proposal and about 6,400 heading home, planners must determine how to move thousands more military family members and civilian workers, find them housing and expand Defense Department school capacities, among other challenges. They would also need to establish potentially costly new operations centers to allow U.S. European Command and other headquarters to seamlessly continue working.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper told reporters 29 JUL from the Pentagon that "probably the area most affected would be the Stuttgart area," where the U.S. military has been since defeating the Nazis in World War II. The plan proposes moving EUCOM and its component, U.S. Special Operations Command Europe, from Stuttgart to Mons, Belgium, to operate alongside NATO's command. U.S. Africa Command could also leave Stuttgart, but no decision has been made on where it would go, Esper said. EUCOM's Patch Barracks, U.S. Africa Command's Kelley Barracks and garrison headquarters in nearby Boeblingen, where a \$100 million school complex opened a few years ago, all could be vacated. The U.S. could also pull out from rural areas like Grafenwoehr, Ansbach and Vilseck in Bavaria. That would likely mean mothballing sites or turning them over to the Germans.

Some moves could begin in weeks, but it's unlikely the initial wave will involve EUCOM, said Capt. Wendy Snyder, the command's spokeswoman. "A lot of planning is needed for HQ moves, so we are a ways down the road," Snyder said in an email. Stuttgart Lord Mayor Fritz Kuhn called the proposed troop cuts "punitive action against an ally" that "upended decades of close cooperation" between Germany and the U.S. But he and other German politicians were hopeful that the plan would be reversed and the bases — and U.S. troops — would stay put. That remains a possibility, with bipartisan resistance to the idea in Congress and the U.S. presidential election less than 100 days away. Trump's rival for the presidency, Joe Biden, has been critical of the troop-cut plan.

The first moves:

An engineering squadron at Spangdahlem Air Base could be the first to move. "Pending further planning and refinement, we anticipate the 52nd Civil Engineering Squadron could move soonest, at a time to be determined, from Germany to Italy," said Gen. Tod Wolters, who 30 JUL said the F-16 fighter squadron and other elements of the 52nd Fighter Wing at Spangdahlem are "reposturing to Italy," but that the German base will remain open to support other airlift missions. Two 173rd Airborne Brigade battalions could leave Grafenwoehr for Vicenza, Italy, "to reunite with their parent brigade headquarters, a move that will enhance unity of command," Wolters said. The Vilseck-based 2nd Cavalry Regiment's 4,500 soldiers would head back to the U.S., he said. That would be the largest of all the troop moves and would mean the departure of the last brigade-size ground combat force from Germany.

"This is a bitter loss," Vilseck Mayor Hans-Martin Schertl said. U.S. troops in Bavaria contribute nearly \$1 billion to the economy. Schertl said Vilseck will need state and federal government financial support. "I was surprised by the decision," Schertl said. "It was always said the training area here is like the crown jewel of the U.S. Army in Europe." Even though Esper said the pullout from Vilseck would be offset by

more rotations to countries in the Black Sea region, some analysts questioned the Pentagon's plan. The realignment was meant to "deter against Russia, assist NATO, strengthen the alliance ... all the while keeping a close eye on the care and feeding of our families," Wolters said.

But at a time when the Pentagon has been focused on countering Russia by building up its force along NATO's eastern flank — in Poland and the Baltic states, for instance — the plan proposes sending U.S. troops south to Italy and west into Belgium. The military intends to reposition three brigade-sized headquarters, an air defense artillery battalion and an engineering battalion to Belgium from Germany, the Pentagon said. Esper and Wolters did not name the units, but since the cuts are concentrated in Bavaria, the likely targets are the 12th Combat Aviation Brigade and the 5th Battalion, 4th Air Defense Artillery at Ansbach, and the 41st Field Artillery Brigade and 18th Military Police Brigade at Grafenwoehr.

Old plans revived:

An argument against the plan is that it doesn't support Trump's rationale that those who don't invest enough in defense should be punished by withdrawing U.S. troops. NATO data show that Italy and Belgium both spend a smaller percentage of their gross domestic product in national defense than Germany. Aspects of the plan have also been rejected in the past. In 2013, U.S. Army Europe shelved a proposal to move troops from Germany to Italy, arguing that units in Germany needed the training ranges at Grafenwoehr. The lack of training space in Italy has been a long-standing problem for the Army. USAREUR declined to state which bases could close or why moving battalions now makes sense, saying only that, "there is planning and coordination that need to be done in order to develop this concept into an actionable plan."

The plan would cut the long-time U.S. military presence near Grafenwoehr in Bavaria, where the Army has spent billions on bases over the years. Grafenwoehr Mayor Edgar Knobloch tried to put a positive spin on the plan's impact. At least, he said, the Army's training grounds "will continue to exist." "Nevertheless, it is sad to hear that America will remove some of its troops" after more than 70 years of an Army presence in the town, Knobloch said. "It would be a shame for the troops to leave. There is a great loyalty from the Germans toward the Americans here."