

The American Response in Eastern Europe: 2014-Present

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Introduction and Methodology

Eastern Europe since the Russian invasion of Ukraine presents a dilemma for foreign policy analysts. In response to the Russian annexation of Crimea, subsequent further Russian incursions into Ukraine, and increasing pressure on other states in Eastern Europe, the United States expanded its military presence in Eastern Europe. However, the expansion in Eastern Europe was a small one that allies and American military planners both considered too little to deter further Russian aggression or to reassure American allies.¹ Why was the response a small one, when NATO members *and* American political officials on both sides of the aisle were all calling for a robust response that included thousands more American soldiers and a permanent US military presence?

The key to understanding the American response in Eastern Europe is that it came at a time of divided government in Washington. Members of Congress first refused to authorize modifications to domestic bases that could save money and provide for flexibility in moving US-based forces abroad. Second, both parties used this restriction as a way to justify a general increase in defense spending. This second stage of the process became a further battle over Democrats' effort to leverage a need for boosted defense spending into a concomitant increase in domestic nondefense spending as well.

In the end, despite the fact that both Republicans and Democrats agreed on the need for an increased permanent presence in Eastern Europe, partisan conflicts still prevented Congress from authorizing one. This case shows several things: the power that Congress still has over foreign

policymaking, the role of partisanship in constraining the President's foreign policy options even when the parties disagree on the foundational issue, and the extent to which domestic policy fights within the United States can outweigh strategic considerations.

In this paper, I first introduce the background of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the details of the American response. Second, I show how all actors, including the executive branch of the US government, Republicans and Democrats in Congress, and NATO allies, all considered the American response inadequate. Third, I explore the congressional politics involved, and I show that many crucial actors simultaneously called for a greater response while constraining the President's ability to use current resources to do so. Lastly, I demonstrate how partisan politics prevented the last option for response – an increase in the size of the military or additional funding for a permanent presence, despite the fact that both sides of the aisle agreed on the need to do so. All of these items illustrate the crucial role that domestic partisan politics play in the ability of the United States to act in a geopolitical crisis.

Context and Background

After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and in the wake of German reunification, Europe in the 1990s was consumed with questions of NATO enlargement. Former members of the Warsaw Pact looked to quickly capitalize on the moment of Russian weakness and solidify their ties to the West. While some analysts commented that NATO enlargement risked needlessly poking the Russian bear, countries as far east as Romania and Bulgaria on the Black Sea and the Baltic States sought NATO membership and soon joined the Atlantic alliance.

As seen from the West, through the mid-2000s, this enlargement had yet to create any real geopolitical problems, as Russia remained relatively weak and pliant. In fact, Russia was a NATO “Partnership for Peace” state that participated in joint military exercises and cooperation. With NATO’s newly enlarged eastern flank seemingly presenting little threat, the alliance shifted its focus elsewhere, even as Russian officials seethed at the encroaching NATO presence.

The first decade of membership for states in Eastern Europe consisted of a focus on military reform, improving capacity to assist UN missions abroad, and training for counterinsurgency assistance in Iraq and Afghanistan. Along with these foci, the main permanent base along NATO’s eastern flank at Mihail Kogălniceanu (MK) Airport in Romania was not developed until the early 2010s. Even then, the base’s main purposes were logistics support and transportation to Afghanistan in support of NATO operations there, rather than supporting operations to reassure allies and deter Russia.

Crisis and Response

The seemingly tranquil atmosphere along NATO’s eastern edge became uneasy after the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, but any sense of security was shattered completely with the Russian annexation of Crimea in early 2014. In doing so, Russia invaded a second state on the path to NATO membership, and Russian actions put NATO’s traditional core mission to its greatest test since the end of the Cold War. A resurgent Russia had once again threatened the territorial status quo in Europe.

The idea that Russian actions constituted an existential threat to Eastern European states, and to the NATO alliance itself, was nearly universal among American officials, Eastern Europeans, and analysts.² Many new NATO members expected to be the next states to see revanchist Russian attacks using “little green men” (Russian “volunteers” fighting abroad without identification on their uniforms) and their Russian weapons and irregular warfare. The alliance responded swiftly by imposing economic sanctions, cutting trade ties, and withdrawing from mutual defense cooperation with Russia.

Despite these decisive steps on diplomatic, political, and economic grounds, there remained significant wariness on the part of Eastern NATO states. Countries along the Black and Baltic seas were vulnerable in their military position relative to Russia. Their militaries suffered from many of the problems seen in Ukraine: outdated equipment, poorly trained personnel, poor supply, and a lack of commitment among many soldiers due to irregular pay. Regardless of the state of modernization programs, the various armed forces of Eastern Europe pale in comparison to the Russian military machine, newly rebuilt after the oil boom of the late 2000s and undergoing a \$700 billion modernization plan.³ Perhaps the most capable military among the Eastern NATO states was Poland, which fielded only about 75,000 ground soldiers using mostly outdated Russian equipment from the Cold War.⁴ This compares to roughly 300,000 regular soldiers (with more irregulars) for Russia. According to a RAND Corporation report, Russia was capable of overrunning many Eastern NATO allies within 60 hours.⁵

NATO’s eastern members needed military assistance, and they let the United States know it. Politicians from Poland, the Baltic States, Romania, and elsewhere took to the media to remind the United States and the NATO alliance of their commitment to their newest members. Poland,

in particular, strongly urged the United States to establish a large permanent presence on Polish soil. While requests have varied over time and previously included offers to host *all* American forces currently in Germany (about 45,000 personnel), the Polish request after the Russian invasion of Ukraine was for three American Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs), or roughly 10,000 personnel.⁶

In June 2014, President Obama flew to Warsaw to announce that support would be forthcoming through the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI). Only a few days before the trip, the White House gave planners at European Command (EUCOM) HQ in Stuttgart, Germany notice that the President would announce roughly \$1 billion of support for states along the Baltic and Black seas. They had until he landed in Warsaw to decide how to spend the money.⁷ While, on the surface, the figure appeared to be an impressive sum of emergency support, the details show otherwise.

What does \$1 billion of American military support provide? The main request from states close to Russia was for a permanent presence of American forces, but the ERI only provided for a *rotational* presence of 600 American paratroopers for the *whole* of Eastern Europe, from the Baltic countries all the way to the shores of the Black Sea. On top of these ground forces, there would be three additional warship visits in the coming year, and a set of six F-15 fighter aircraft sent to the Baltic Area. Lastly, there would be more money for military exercises.

These moves did not create the reassurance that the program's name implied. Not long after the President's visit to Warsaw, Polish officials had already begun to criticize the American response and express that they felt the alliance had betrayed them. Not only had the response failed to

reassure eastern alliance members, but officials within those countries also lost faith that NATO would back their Article 5 commitments in the event of Russian incursions onto their own territory. The tepid response to Russia in the ERI was particularly disheartening to those Eastern European NATO members who had supported American operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Officials began to describe ties to NATO, and particularly those with the United States, as “worthless.” Not only was it a worthless alliance for these officials, but they also described it as counterproductive, because it had created “a false sense of security. We’ll get in conflict with the Germans, Russians and we’ll think that everything is super,” said one Polish official. Further, these officials described themselves as *murzynskosc*, which is a derogatory term used for dark-skinned people who do work for others. In other words, Polish officials felt they had been assigned the job of defending themselves against the Russian threat with little to no assistance from the United States.⁸ These type of statements show a direct questioning of the basic premise of deterrence and mutual assistance, upon which the NATO alliance is built.

Distrust in the credibility of alliance commitments was not confined to elite actors alone. Only one-third of Poles believed that NATO would help in case of an emergency, and the measures taken in the first three years of the European Reassurance Initiative had done little to change this attitude. Soon after the announcement of limited measures to reassure allies in the East, citizens of Poland began coordinating paramilitary organizations called “preppers,” because of the lack of confidence in American or NATO assistance.⁹

These paramilitary organizations are for the expressed purpose of resisting a sub-conventional attack from Russia, where “little green men” without insignia attack, while fomenting instability

in the country and leaving the Russian government with plausible deniability. These types of attacks fail to create a high-profile focal point that would give American officials the political cover they need to take robust action. Given that most Poles believe that the United States would fail to support them even in the case of a high-profile emergency, they began to take measures into their own hands by preemptively organizing resistance forces.

NATO officials took notice of the reaction among the members under Russian threat, and the 2017 version of ERI has called for a full four-battalion (about 4,000 soldiers) rotational force in the Baltics, with one battalion each in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia (with only increased exercises in Romania and Bulgaria). While this move aimed at recovering some of the lost credibility that came with the initial reaction, and while the announcement was welcomed by the Baltic States, the execution of the plan failed to remove doubts in the minds of Eastern European allies.

The UK, the US, and Germany each agreed to provide one battalion, but the alliance had difficulty finding a willing party to provide the fourth battalion. Initially, the United States promised to provide two battalions, but then it backed off the commitment.¹⁰ NATO requested that Canada provide the fourth, but while the government in Ottawa claimed to be “considering options,” NATO officials stated that the Canadians were sending “contradictory signals” as to their willingness to provide the requested forces.¹¹ The message to eastern alliance members was clear through the indecision – they did not have the backing from their NATO allies that they wanted. The result of increased efforts at deterrence and assurance in 2017 ended the same as the first ones in the immediate wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. NATO left its eastern members feeling vulnerable and let down by their more powerful alliance partners.

Explaining the outcome

While the efforts in Eastern Europe were an expansion of the American presence there, it was a minimal one, and one considered inadequate by both the host states in the region and American military planners alike. General Philip Breedlove, the four-star general and EUCOM commander at the time, repeatedly requested that Congress do more and authorize an “enduring” presence in both the Baltic and Black Sea areas. In his annual “posture statement” to Congress in 2015, the General made several telling statements, such as that “virtual presence is actual absence,” thereby undermining the idea that rotational presence is adequate.¹²

He also stated that rotational presence “will not have lasting effect unless it is followed by the development and *fielding* of credible and *persistent* deterrent capabilities” and accompanied by an immediate halt to “any additional reductions in the number of assigned forces in Europe.”¹³ He acknowledged that the ERI provided only temporary support and further action to assign an increased number of permanent forces to the European theatre fell to Congress. Independent analysis from RAND provided backing to these requests, as it suggested a force of seven brigades (roughly 20,000 ground personnel) was required in the area to provide a credible deterrent.¹⁴

Other independent analyses presented to Congress provided further support, which recommended that a permanent brigade-level (roughly 3,000 personnel) force be stationed in both Poland and Romania, along with battalion-level forces (roughly 1,000) in each of the Baltic states. All told, this would be at least an increase of 12,000 personnel to the eastern NATO allies in order to deter Russian aggression. Anything less would be judged as not only insufficient

deterrence, but also it would betray a lack of decisiveness and unity on the part of NATO that would actually embolden further provocation from Russia.¹⁵

Such a move was not forthcoming, and over the next two years of ERI (FY 2015 and 16), the President did the little he could without congressional support for more. He shifted a few warships and fighter aircraft around the European Theatre and ordered ground exercises along the eastern flank for personnel stationed in Germany. Even these minimal responses required budgetary requests to Congress within the annual National Defense Authorization and Appropriations (NDAA) with accompanying offsets to weapons acquisitions elsewhere in the Pentagon budget. In the FY2015 request, Congress passed the ERI request without modification but the President vetoed the 2016 NDAA because it “fell woefully short in key areas.”¹⁶ For instance, funds from the base Pentagon budget (which could be used by the President to shift forces) were transferred to weapons acquisition, while removing funds for domestic non-defense priorities from the President and using Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO) accounts to skirt sequestration budget caps.¹⁷

Thus, the President was hamstrung from the very beginning in his ability to provide adequate support to American and NATO allies feeling the Russian threat in the wake of the 2014 invasion of Ukraine. He was largely confined to forces that were already present within the European Theatre, which had been cut in the years before the crisis in an effort to “buy” congressional support for a domestic round of base closures, which it failed to secure. Congress authorized no new money for operations in Eastern Europe. ERI’s path through the NDAA simply authorized the use of existing funds from the base Pentagon budget for the purposes the

President outlined, meaning that any support given to Eastern Europe would have to come at the expense of forces elsewhere in Europe, which were already on the chopping block.

Despite consistent and assertive requests to Congress from American allies, the American military itself, and the President, permanent stationing of American forces never materialized, as it would mean shifting forces from the continental United States (CONUS), something that members of Congress were loathe to authorize. Not only did permanent bases fail to materialize, but a serious debate in Congress was never undertaken on the topic, despite persistent requests from American allies. Each year since 2015, an amendment has been added to the NDAA which prohibits the Department of Defense (DOD) from conducting a BRAC, and in each year the amendment passed with a simple voice vote.¹⁸

Members of Congress returned from trips to Eastern Europe having dismissed allied requests out of hand. Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois said “I told both Lithuania and Poland that in light of our current federal budget and the debate over sequestration in the Department of Defense there are no plans to expand permanent military bases of the United States anywhere that I know of in this current budget cycle.” He made this statement all while noting that the leaders in allied capitals openly questioned whether the United States was serious about the threat posed by Russia. Senator Durbin assured them that the President took the issue seriously. It was simply a matter of “budgetary constraints.”¹⁹

Congressional (in)action

In order to understand Durbin’s statement, we have to dive into the debates within Congress at the time. Two members in particular had power over whether a permanent shift of forces and

budget increases occurred: John McCain, who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), and Mac Thornberry, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC). Both of these men wielded significant power in determining how funds were both authorized and appropriated. They were also both defense hawks, who traditionally supported an assertive American position in foreign affairs. Thornberry repeatedly said, “I am not willing to accept that we must have a smaller military.”²⁰

First, it is impossible to discuss the tepid response in Eastern Europe without reaching back to the Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011. During the debate over raising the debt ceiling of the United States, the President and Congress could not agree on particular areas for spending cuts. The President generally wanted more cuts in defense and congressional Republicans wanted domestic nondefense cuts. In order to try to force a deal, the Budget Control Act set up a mechanism called “sequestration,” in which automatic spending cuts took place if the parties could reach no agreement on specific cuts. Under sequestration, \$1.2 trillion in cuts to the deficit over ten years automatically took place, with another \$1.2 trillion to be identified by committee later. Of these cuts, about half were to come from the defense budget.²¹

Thus, the situation encountering lawmakers and the President when the Russian invasion occurred in 2014 was one of hard budgetary constraints. We can see in this particular situation that, when the overall level of resources assigned to defense are reduced, even agreement between hawks and internationalists on a particular mission can lead to constraints in response, because of the spillover of disagreement in other areas. We can see this behavior quite clearly from both Senator McCain and Representative Thornberry.

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Senator McCain criticized President Obama's response as "being in the best tradition of Neville Chamberlain" as he "sat on the sidelines," watching Ukrainians being "slaughtered" by Vladimir Putin's most modern equipment.²² In McCain's view, not only did President Obama fail to assist Ukraine directly through the provision of weapons, but he also failed to adequately support NATO allies in Eastern Europe, despite the repeated calls from President Obama's top generals to *McCain's own committee* for exactly that. In response to the initial wave of ERI moves, McCain claimed that the failure to permanently station American forces in the Baltics meant there was no "tripwire" in place in case of a Russian invasion. Thus, if Russia made a move on the Baltic countries, it could mean "the end of NATO."²³ McCain has since repeatedly called for permanent stationing of American forces in Eastern Europe, particularly in Estonia.²⁴

Representative Mac Thornberry, who heads the House Armed Services Committee, had a similar response to events in Eastern Europe. When the Russian invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine took place, he stated that the region was under a greater level of threat than at any time, even during many times at the height of the Cold War. He also stated his belief that Russia constitutes an "existential threat" to the United States.²⁵ Thornberry responded by fully supporting the President's European Reassurance Initiative, but he also made repeated calls for more action, including criticizing the Obama administration for its slow and weak responses. He has stated his belief that a greater presence from NATO, and "especially the United States" would be beneficial.²⁶

Yet, these two men sat at the head of committees capable of prescribing funds and their use for exactly this purpose. They also have a significant backing among rank-and-file Republicans who

do not sit on the armed services committees. For instance, Republican Senator Tom Cotton called for permanent basing in Eastern Europe, but indicated that a general increase in the military (and the military budget) would be needed. Similarly, Republican Senator Dan Sullivan of Alaska criticized the Democratic Minority Leader's treatment of the 2015 NDAA and called for a general increase in the military budget. Why did these two powerful members of Congress fail to wield their leverage to produce the exact expansion in Eastern Europe for which they called and when they had significant backing from their own party?

Option 1: Redeploy from the United States

An expansion of the American presence in Eastern Europe could have occurred in two ways. The first was to redeploy forces from the United States, especially en masse via a BRAC process that would evaluate the needs of the whole force in the United States, along with its missions overseas. As mentioned earlier, despite repeated calls from the President, high-ranking members of the military, and the Pentagon itself, Congress failed to allow a new BRAC round in any year since the Russian invasion. Not only did Congress fail to approve a redeployment of forces from the United States to Eastern Europe, it attached amendments to every NDAA, prohibiting the use of funds for a BRAC or to even plan for a BRAC. Each year, Congress approved these amendments with an overwhelming voice vote.

As chairs of the two most relevant committees, Thornberry and McCain could have swayed their committees, and the Republican Congress as a whole, in favor of a new BRAC round. However, both openly stated that they opposed a new BRAC round. McCain even went so far as to claim that BRACs themselves are an act of cowardice since “they (Members of Congress) can't close a single base of their own. But I would never repeat that.”²⁷ The lack of support for a restructuring

of the force between CONUS and overseas restricted the President's options for a permanent reassignment of forces to eastern NATO allies. In addition, the military had already tried to "buy" a BRAC by doing a "proof of concept" realignment of forces in Europe in the years prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, leaving the President and the EUCOM commander with fewer resources at their disposal in the region.²⁸

When asked why quicker and more substantial action did not occur in Eastern Europe, General Breedlove replied, "If we decide to move forces into Eastern Europe permanently, those forces have to come from somewhere. No state leadership team is going to want to give up thousands of households and the jobs they represent to do this and would most likely oppose such an action."²⁹ Thus, not only did the two most powerful members of Congress on this issue oppose a general realignment of forces from bases in the United States, but there is also a sense that few in Congress overall supported taking forces from the United States to respond in Eastern Europe. Congressional prevention of another BRAC every year since the Russian invasion on simple voice votes certainly supports this view.

We can further see an illustration of this perspective in the behavior of other members of Congress, who simultaneously called for greater action in Eastern Europe, while fighting against changes to bases within their districts. Republican Congressman David Price called for greater support to Ukraine, along with a bolstering of defenses to Eastern European allies like Poland and the Czech Republic.³⁰ One of the first moves called for in the ERI by EUCOM planners was to increase the airlift capabilities in Poland in order to enhance the country's ability to mobilize forces flexibly in response to any Russian provocation. This call was to redeploy C-130 cargo

aircraft to Poland in order to train Polish pilots on their own newly purchased C-130s, which allowed for greater battlefield mobility and flexibility.

The main location for C-130s in the United States was Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina, in Representative Price's district. Despite calling for a greater response in Eastern Europe, he opposed changes to Pope as part of a general restructure of airlift capacity, of which the redeployment to Poland was a part.³¹ Similarly, both Senators from North Carolina, Tillis and Burr, made statements in favor of providing greater support to Eastern European allies but opposed any change to Pope, despite the fact that the realignment would allow for greater budgetary slack and flexibility in the Pentagon's use of airlift capacity, which would allow it to more easily support eastern NATO allies.³²

Another example comes from Congressman John Ratcliffe of Texas. Since the Russian invasion in 2014, Ratcliffe has introduced amendments to every NDAA (and other bills) that prohibit funds from being used for, or planning for, another BRAC round to realign forces in the United States, save money, or change the structure that allows for more flexibility in positioning around the world.³³ Simultaneously, Ratcliffe has called for a greater response to Russian actions in Eastern Europe, and offered no objections to an amendment that called for higher permanent troop levels in Eastern NATO allies. The amendment passed via another voice vote, and he later voted for the bill that included the amendment.³⁴

In terms of congressional motivations to prevent a BRAC, many are quite open about it. Rep. Ratcliffe, for instance, couched the introduction of his amendment in the idea that the Red River Depot in his district is a "vital job creator" that employs "more than 5,000 people in northeast

Texas and southern Arkansas.” In addition, he hinted at the idea that the installation is not 100% necessary by referring to it as an “insurance policy” rather than a necessity.³⁵ This comports with the testimony from defense officials, who estimated an excess basing capacity in the United States of between 18-30%.³⁶

Second, many who opposed a BRAC did so because they were unwilling to delegate power over their district’s economic prospects to a President from the other party. Republican Rep. Austin Scott of Georgia couched opposition to BRAC in the language of a political schism, by saying, “And there is a tremendous divide I think, an extreme lack of trust between Congress and the administration.” He continued by asserting that “I think the administration has well earned that lack of trust from the way I see it.”³⁷ In general, the tone of Republicans in BRAC hearings with officials from the Democratic administration was one of combativeness, even going so far as to describe themselves as “mad” at the some of the responses from the witnesses.³⁸ Thus, Republican members of Congress made appeals to both the inherent distributional nature of domestic basing, along with the balance of power implications that it would have to “trust” a President from the opposing party with the economic livelihoods of many of their constituents.

Representative Susan Davis, a Democrat from California made similar statements to Republicans on the distributive nature of domestic bases. In a hearing before the House Armed Services Committee, she asked why Congress should even consider closing bases when the benefits of doing so would not accrue for years down the line. Further, she stated openly that members of Congress were “possessive” of installations in their district and unwilling to give up “an inch of land.”

However, she also asked the witness before the committee, Katherine Hammack, the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Installations, Energy, and Environment, some leading and generous questions, indicating her openness to a BRAC. Rep. Davis inquired how the Assistant Secretary planned on crafting a convincing argument for members of Congress, who are loathe to do anything on a BRAC, even though “it seems logical that one would be able to capture the resources that are needed out of our infrastructure.”³⁹ Rep. Joe Courtney of Connecticut did likewise in quoting a Navy Admiral who described BRAC as “a good process” and portraying a previous base realignment effort in Connecticut as a “great success.”⁴⁰

These statements indicate a mild openness among some Democrats to proceed with a BRAC, in order to give the Pentagon and the President the needed flexibility to resize installations in the United States and realign some of them overseas, if needed. Statements from Republicans were that of almost blanket disapproval of such authority, who would be giving the President significant power over the economic situation in their districts. This division is clear by looking at the result of an amendment offered by Texas Democrat Beto O’Rourke, which would have struck down the previous amendment to prohibit planning and executing a BRAC. The amendment failed by a vote of 157-263, with 85% of Republicans voting against it and more than two-thirds of Democrats voting in favor. Unsurprisingly, Reps. Davis and Courtney voted in favor, and Reps. Ratcliffe and Scott voted against.⁴¹

Thus we see repeated examples of individuals fighting against changes to domestic basing at every step, while simultaneously calling for more troops in Eastern Europe. First, the Pentagon preemptively tried to “buy” congressional support for a BRAC with a “proof of concept” realignment of European installations, which brought as many as 5,000 military personnel back

to the United States from Europe. Second, it prevented the President from undergoing a sizeable realignment of forces from the United States to Europe in response to the Russian invasion. All told, the refusal to approve a BRAC first led to a general reduction of forces overseas, particularly in Europe, followed by a serious constraint in the President's ability to deploy forces from the United States to reassure Eastern European allies.

All of this left out the possibility of simply using the forces currently at the Pentagon's disposal in the United States to address the Russian challenge, and left planners, policy makers, the President, and Congress with no choice but to pursue option number 2.

Option 2: Increase Budget and Size of Force

The other route through which an expansion of forces in Eastern Europe could have occurred was as part of a general increase in the size of the military and defense spending. On the surface, there appeared to be a bipartisan consensus to do so. Not only did Senator McCain and Congressman Thornberry make statements in support of a larger budget, but many Democrats did as well. For example, Democratic Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois, returning from a trip to Eastern Europe made a statement on the floor of the Senate. In it, he indicated the real and present threat that Russia presented to Eastern NATO allies, and demonstrated his support for a permanent presence in Eastern Europe. Durbin, who voted against the Iraq War, is hardly a hawk, but in his call for increased support for Eastern NATO allies, he blamed the budgetary issues within the US government for the lack of support while simultaneously calling for an increased defense budget and an end to sequestration.⁴²

Democratic Senator Jack Reed, the ranking member of the Senate Armed Services committee, sounded a similar note. He also has repeatedly called for the end of sequestration cuts to the defense budget, supported an increased presence in Eastern Europe, and a general increase in the defense budget.⁴³ These statements align with many made by Senator McCain, who signaled his strong support for all of these same items. Thus, on the surface, it appears that Senators McCain and Reed actually agreed on the need to remove sequestration cuts, boost military funding, and enhance the American presence in Eastern Europe in response to Russian provocation. The two most powerful men in Congress on the issue of defense spending agreed on the need for a more robust response, so why did it not happen?

Republicans wanted to increase the level of defense spending beyond sequestration levels. So did Democrats. Bipartisan agreement on a boost to defense spending and to provide greater support to Eastern Europe hid a deep disagreement. The two sides fought to the point of congressional gridlock and a presidential veto on whether defense increases would come with a concomitant increase in *domestic nondefense spending*. In what Democrats came to refer as a “McCain Amendment,” Republicans wanted to relax BCA caps on defense spending but not domestic nondefense spending.⁴⁴

Senator Reed introduced an amendment that intended to block moves to increase defense spending without BCA relief for domestic nondefense spending, but it failed by a party-line vote of 46-51.⁴⁵ Republicans refused to move on any increases to domestic nondefense spending, and President Obama promised a veto to the 2016 NDAA, which included no increase in nondefense spending.⁴⁶ On October 22, 2015, President Obama acted on this promise and used only his fifth veto on the 2016 NDAA, saying that it failed to provide for the national defense in a fiscally

responsible way, in addition to failing to provide relief from domestic nondefense sequestration caps.⁴⁷

In the end, the sides reached a compromise NDAA that partially relaxed sequestration caps for both defense and nondefense spending. Not surprisingly, this extra defense spending went into congressional districts at home rather than into shoring up allies in Eastern Europe. Congress specifically authorized the extra defense dollars for an East Coast air defense site that will likely cost more than \$3 billion, along with \$2.2 billion in additional acquisitions of more F/A-18E/F and F-35 fighter jets. The Pentagon said it did not need any of these three projects, whose total is far more than would be required for a permanent presence in Eastern Europe.⁴⁸

There was also disagreement on the particularities of the defense spending itself. Republicans repeatedly tried to move funding for defense priorities to the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) fund in order to sidestep sequestration caps and claim there had been no increase in either defense or nondefense spending. President Obama again promised a veto to this tactic, along with congressional Democrats' moves to block defense increases without domestic nondefense increases. Both Senator Reed and Senator Tim Kaine, the eventual Democratic Vice Presidential nominee in 2016, spoke out against this use of OCO. Kaine stated that "the item that is in the NDAA that I have the greatest concern about is the use of what I consider a flagrant budget gimmick to sneak by defense spending caps that were imposed by the 2011 Budget Control Act."

Not only was the use of OCO a way to sidestep the sequestration caps, but it also hamstrung the executive branch in long-term planning and the flexibility with which it could use the funds,

which Democrats objected to as well. Kaine again stated “Defense needs the ability to plan. If we put the money in the OCO account, is it going to be here next year? Is it not going to be here? There is sort of a wink and a nod that it will probably be here. We ought to be acknowledging that these funds are needed in the base defense budget so that our DOD personnel can plan that it will be there in the future, because that is probably our intent.”⁴⁹ This use of OCO to authorize increased defense spending allowed the Republican-controlled legislature a greater degree of leeway in how the funds were used, and it hamstrung the executive’s ability to engage in long-term planning and crisis response.

Thus, in terms of the theory presented here, the budgetary constraints of the sequestration led to a fight on a topic where there appeared to be agreement. Hawks like John McCain and Mac Thornberry agreed with both doves like Richard Durbin *and* internationalists like Jack Reed, in that there needed to be a greater American military response to Russian provocations in Eastern Europe. However, Republicans would not agree to it without general military spending increases and would not agree to a realignment of forces from the United States to Europe. Democrats agreed to move forces to Europe *and* to increase the general level of military spending, but only as part of a general relaxation of sequestration cuts that would include domestic nondefense spending as well.

The result in this situation is rather counterintuitive. Nearly everyone agreed upon a need to bolster the American presence in Eastern Europe, along with a need to increase the defense budget. But it did not happen, as the partisan fight over military spending, the ability of the executive branch to plan and execute, along with freeing the President for greater spending in all areas, bled into the American military response in Eastern Europe. If one party had been in

control of both the executive and legislative branches, there would have been more freedom for action from the President, as Democrats would not have had to compromise on its other agenda items in order to take action on the military presence in Europe. We can see that this is what occurs during one-party rule in Washington by examining past cases. First, in 2004 and 2005, the Republican Congress gave President Bush the ability to carry out options 1 *and* 2, by authorizing a domestic BRAC, which allowed the Pentagon to shift forces from domestic bases to overseas missions, in addition to approving increased defense budgets while cutting taxes.⁵⁰ Similarly, during unified Democratic rule from 2009-2011, the Democratic Congress provided the President Option 2, with increased defense budgets along with increases in domestic nondefense spending as well. Within one month of taking office, President Trump announced a plan to spend an additional \$54 billion on defense with exactly \$54 billion in nondefense cuts. His plan will likely be passed, as Republicans no longer have to compromise on nondefense spending under the threat of a Presidential veto. Only when the parties split the branches of government was there a complete breakdown in the ability to respond as both sides recommended, because of the inability to resolve the fundamental distributional conflicts of either Option 1 or Option 2.

All told, the result was a hamstrung President Obama in 2014 and a tepid response to a serious international crisis, and it occurred because of the different incentives between Congress and the President, along with their partisan divisions. First, Congress is reticent to approve a BRAC that can have significant economic repercussions on their districts, but they are especially unlikely to do so when the President is from the opposing party, which foreclosed Option 1. Second, President Obama was restricted from redeploying US-based forces to Eastern Europe as a deterrent, which forced him to pursue Option 2, which would have required an agreement on the distribution of how additional funds would be used. Lastly, the United States itself is perhaps

the only area in the world with excess “slack” in the American military force. Previous Pentagon efforts to “purchase” a domestic BRAC have come at the expense of forces in Europe, as well as Asia and the Middle East, and forces still in those regions have critical missions themselves. Without authorization for a BRAC, the President could only use limited forces already at his disposal in the European Theatre and no additional forces from elsewhere in the world. The outcome was a muted response that both parties and American allies all considered insufficient.

On Cost

Several studies have concluded that the cost argument itself is dubious. The RAND Corporation found that stationing forces overseas does not entail measurably higher direct costs than stationing them in the United States itself.⁵¹ Some costs are higher because of the logistics challenges involved, but the use of local suppliers and the lower cost of living (especially in countries like Poland, Romania, or Latvia) reduces the costs of base maintenance considerably. This is an argument that these countries make repeatedly when confronted by the type of response Senator Durbin offered, especially in reference to current American bases in more expensive places throughout Europe, like Germany and England. Embassy officials throughout Eastern Europe, but especially in Poland, are lobbied on a weekly basis to move entire units from Germany onto their territories, using this particular argument.⁵²

While some costs may be included up front to move forces in order to gain long-term savings (or simply stasis in cost over time), the estimates by RAND undermine the cost arguments that were made in Congress. The RAND study recommended a seven brigade force in Eastern Europe, which would cost an estimated \$2.7 billion, which is only a marginal increase from the first two years of ERI and actually a decrease from the 2017 ERI request. The congressional debates

focused on increases of *tens of billions* supposedly needed to respond to the crisis, but when money was available after the 2016 NDAA compromise, it went to domestic defense spending in the form of weapons acquisition.

A comparable case is instructive here as well, as the new American Marine base in Darwin Australia cost \$1.6 billion for an upgrade to the infrastructure to house the 2,500 permanently stationed American personnel. First, Australia is sharing in the cost of the upgrade, something that the eastern NATO allies have also offered.⁵³ Second, \$1.6 billion is hardly an extravagant price to be rejected out of hand, especially when the *yearly* (as opposed to one-time in Darwin) cost of the ERI has been \$1 billion in FY2015, \$1 billion in FY2016, and \$3.4 billion for FY2017. RAND estimates for Eastern Europe specifically are consistent with what has occurred in Australia, and cast doubt on the use of cost as a relevant objection to the permanent placement of forces along NATO's eastern flank.

Given that the cost argument is less than convincing when it comes to redistributing forces from CONUS or elsewhere in Europe, dramatic new costs would only result if increasing forces in Europe or stationing a permanent force in Eastern Europe meant standing up an entirely new unit or increasing the overall size of the military force, in order to prevent the loss of units in congressional districts at home. As we saw in the previous sections, members of Congress are reticent to permit the removal of a unit permanently assigned to their district, and so they look to make crisis responses into a need for a generally larger force and budget, which brings additional partisan divisions over spending preferences into the mix.

There are large strategic benefits to placing forces further East in terms of deterring further Russian provocations and shoring up American alliances, but to a member of Congress, the electoral benefits of gaining this strategic advantage are minimal compared to the potentially disastrous electoral consequences of allowing the removal of a base from the district. As we also saw in the previous section, the need to avoid domestic base closures and realignments carries over into other areas of electoral politics. Republicans see an electoral benefit to increasing the size of the military but little benefit to increasing nondefense spending, and they could perhaps face electoral trouble if they are seen as compromising on domestic nondefense spending.

Even for hawks like Senator McCain and Rep. Thornberry, they use the lack of BRAC authorization as leverage to try to obtain larger defense budgets in general. If successful, that strategy would yield them the electoral benefit of maintaining the base in their state/district, along with corresponding to their overall hawkish preferences. Alternatively, Democrats see some benefit to increasing defense spending, but they see more of an electoral benefit to increasing nondefense domestic spending. These contradictions in electoral incentives produce gridlock even in situations of seeming agreement on military force distribution, as we saw in the case of American forces in Eastern Europe from 2014, onward.

Conclusion

As one military planner within EUCOM said, “a big stumbling block for increased permanent presence is the forces would need to come from CONUS, so there would be Congressional push-back.”⁵⁴ This statement gets at part of the explanation for the lack of greater response to the crisis in Eastern Europe, but it does not tell the entire story. While members of Congress restricted the executive’s ability to realign forces from the United States, they all still agreed on the need for a

robust response, but the lack of support for redistributing forces from CONUS mandated new spending on forces for Eastern Europe.

Independent studies show that the *real* level of spending needed to place forces in Eastern Europe is relatively small, but all but some “doves” in Congress use the issue as a rationale to increase military spending generally or to try to extract concessions on domestic nondefense spending. Because of this manufactured need for massive new spending, the issue became a partisan football that Republicans used to try to pull sequestration caps from defense spending and Democrats used to try to pull sequestration caps from domestic nondefense spending.

The executive branch desired a larger and permanent force in Eastern Europe and the European Theatre more generally, and the head of EUCOM made repeated requests to Congress for exactly that. Many members of Congress wanted this as well, but only with a general increase in the military budget. The President and his Democratic allies on Capitol Hill would only support a larger general defense budget if it came with a corresponding increase in domestic nondefense spending. Thus, this case is a continuation of the budgetary squabbles that resulted in the Budget Control Act of 2011 and sequestration, which is a highly partisan and ideological issue that would be relatively easy to alleviate under conditions of one party rule, as we saw in 2004-5 with unified Republican rule and 2009-11 with unified Democratic rule.

American allies in the region have also constantly pushed both the executive branch and Congress for more. Congress has shown an acute hesitance to act on these repeated requests because of “budgetary concerns” that have shown to be dubious if the issue was one of simple redeployment to a new location. The real issue at its core was a lack of desire to lose an

electorally valuable but strategically useless base for a strategically valuable but electorally useless one. Because of this roadblock, Congress hit a second stumbling block over what kind of spending increases to permit, with each party attempting to extract their most electorally-efficient spending from the issue. With Congress's lack of willingness to give up forces at home, it became a debate over new spending, which could not be solved because of the partisan differences over spending preferences and trust in the executive.

¹ Vandiver 2016a

² Press Association 2015

³ DeGhett 2016

⁴ Polish Ministry of National Defence 2014

⁵ Shlapak and Johnson 2016

⁶ Mix 2016: 10

⁷ McIntyre correspondence Feb 4, 2016

⁸ "Polish Foreign Minister" 2014

⁹ Sieradzka 2016

¹⁰ Philippines News Agency 2016

¹¹ Berthiaume 2016

¹² Breedlove 2015

¹³ Italics mine. Fielding in this case is synonymous with a movement of forces that are permanently stationed in the Continental United States (CONUS) to the European Theatre, something that Congress has not only been unwilling to do, but they have been moving forces from the European Theatre back to the US.

¹⁴ Shlapak and Johnson 2016

¹⁵ Brzezinski testimony 2015

¹⁶ Gould 2015

¹⁷ Fabian 2015

¹⁸ H. Amdt 1061 to HR 4974 2015-16; H. Amdt 139 to HR 2029 2015-16; H. Amdt 2 to HR 522 2017-18

¹⁹ Lesniewski 2015

²⁰ Heritage Foundation Forum 2014

²¹ OMB report PL 112-155

²² 161 Cong. Rec. S1090-91

²³ *Sputnik News* 2015

²⁴ Associated Press 27 Dec. 2016

²⁵ Wong 2015

²⁶ Thornberry 2015; Vandiver 2015b

²⁷ Defense One March 17, 2015; *Brookings Institution* Forum 2015

²⁸ Beardsley 2015

²⁹ Email correspondence General Breedlove October 16, 2016

³⁰ Wiser 2014

³¹ Brooks 2014

³² Senators Cochran and Mikulski letter March 2015; Gizzi and Friedman 2015; *Associated Press* March 2016; op. cit. Fay Observer

³³ H. Amdt 1061 to HR 4974 2015-16, H. Amdt 139 to HR 2029 2015-16, H. Amdt 2 to HR 522 2017-18

³⁴ 161 Cong. Rec. H3219-35 (May 15, 2015), voted amendment en bloc 1048 on HR 4909

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- ³⁵ 162 Cong. Rec. H2837 (May 18, 2016) (Statement by Rep. John Ratcliffe)
- ³⁶ Military Construction Committee Hearing March 3, 2015 (statement by John Conger, Assistant Secretary of Defense)
- ³⁷ HASC No. 114-16 March 3, 2015 pg 21-22
- ³⁸ HASC No. 114-16 March 3, 2015 pg 9
- ³⁹ HASC No. 114-16 March 3, 2015 pg 19
- ⁴⁰ HASC No. 114-16 March 3, 2015 pg. 13
- ⁴¹ H. Amdt 1189 to HR 5293
- ⁴² 161 Cong. Rec. S3377-79 (June 1, 2015) (Statement by Senator Richard Durbin); 161 Cong. Rec. S3665-66 (June 3, 2015) (Statement by Senator Richard Durbin)
- ⁴³ 161 Cong. Rec. S3909-10 (June 9, 2015) (Statement by Senator Jack Reed)
- ⁴⁴ 162 Cong. Rec. S5109-10 (July 14, 2016) (Statement by Senator John McCain)
- ⁴⁵ S. Amdt. 1521 to S. Amdt. 1463
- ⁴⁶ Wiser 2015
- ⁴⁷ Mufson 2015; Obama 2015
- ⁴⁸ Koshgarian 2015
- ⁴⁹ 161 Cong. Rec. S3744-45 (June 4, 2015) (Statement by Sen. Tim Kaine)
- ⁵⁰ BRAC vote: Athens Banner-Herald, Oct. 28, 2005; Increased defense budgets and lowering taxes: White House "President Bush's FY 2005 Budget" Feb 2, 2004
- ⁵¹ Lostumbo et al. 2013
- ⁵² Interview Materials, US Embassy Warsaw 11-12 Aug, 2015
- ⁵³ Nicholson 2013
- ⁵⁴ Email correspondence with John McIntyre, ECJ5-R Posture Branch, Patch Barracks, Stuttgart.

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