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Army wants to double tanks, boost soldiers in Europe

By Michelle Tan
July 15, 2015

The Army wants to send a second brigade's worth of tanks, Bradleys and other heavy equipment, and dedicate an entire division to exercises, training and assurance missions in Europe amid growing concerns over Russian aggression.

These moves come as the Army continues a massive drawdown of forces that has already cut 10,000 soldiers — including two brigade combat teams — from Europe. Another 1,700 soldiers will be cut over the next three years as part of the latest round of reductions, leaving about 30,000 soldiers forward-stationed in Europe.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno discussed his desire to place a second brigade's worth of tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles, Howitzers and other equipment in Europe during a recent interview with The Wall Street Journal.

His remarks come as senior U.S. military leaders voice their concerns about the threat posed by Russia, which in the last year has annexed the Crimea region, secured a vital port in the Black Sea and sponsored a civil war in Eastern Ukraine that has claimed thousands of lives.

There is "a growing recognition that this is not a spike in bad behavior by President Putin, but that this represents a much longer term set of challenges that we're going to deal with," Lt. Gen.

Ben Hodges, commander of U.S. Army Europe, said Monday during a meeting with reporters at the Pentagon.

Last spring, in an effort to reassure America's allies in Europe, the Army launched Operation Atlantic Resolve in the three Baltic States and Poland. The operation, which consists of a series of exercises and training events, has since expanded to Romania, Bulgaria and elsewhere.

The Army also began building a brigade-sized set of equipment in Europe for use by regionally-aligned forces sent to the region for Operation Atlantic Resolve and other exercises and training events with partner nations. Known as the European Activity Set, the equipment will be split into several countries, including the three Baltic States, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania and Germany, for regular use by incoming rotational forces.

Most of the equipment — about 1,200 vehicles in all, including about 220 tanks, Bradleys and Howitzers — should arrive in Europe by December, Hodges said.

"We've been working with these countries for quite a few months, looking at possible locations, sorting out how we're going to do this," Hodges said.

There are about 30,000 soldiers forward-stationed in Europe. (Photo: Sgt. A.M. LaVey/173rd Airborne Brigade)

While the equipment is expected to arrive by the end of the year, the various host nation sites likely won't all be ready until summer 2016, Hodges said. Until then, some of the EAS will be stored in Coleman Barracks in Mannheim, Germany.

The second set of equipment, known as Army Prepositioned Stocks, would be reserved for contingencies.

A final decision about the APS has not been made, Hodges said. What also has yet to be determined is where that equipment might come from, Army officials said.

Army senior leaders also are considering dedicating the 4th Infantry Division to Europe as part of the service's regionally-aligned forces concept.

The 4th Infantry Division headquarters, of Fort Carson, Colorado, already is aligned with U.S. European Command. A headquarters element, led by one of the division's deputy commanding generals, is currently deployed to Europe, tasked with coordinating the various exercises and training missions across the region.

As the Army draws down its forward-stationed force in Europe, it is relying more and more on rotational, regionally-aligned forces to conduct exercises and training. In addition to the 4th Infantry Division headquarters, the Army also has sent the 1st Brigade Combat Team and an aviation battalion from the 3rd Infantry Division to Europe.

Hodges said the plan to align all of the 4th Infantry Division — to include its brigade combat teams, aviation brigade and enablers — has not been finalized. 4th ID includes about 12,000 soldiers.

"It's a proposal, and I certainly would welcome it," he said. "It would make it a very effective and efficient way to generate what was needed for the rotational force."

The 10th Special Forces Group, which also is aligned with Europe, is stationed at Fort Carson as well, Hodges said.

"You can see a great synergy here," he said.

Army Europe will continue to rely on rotational forces as it works to meet the demand for troops in the region, according to Hodges.

"There'll be periods in the coming year where we'll need more, and the Army is going to deliver what the combatant commander needs," he said.

This includes a surge in aviation capability for next year to match an increase in exercise needs, Hodges said. The U.S. also has committed, in the coming year, to providing an attack helicopter battalion to serve on the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, or VJTF, a new quick-reaction force that came out of the September NATO summit in Wales.

"The Army is leaning over backwards to try and help meet our requirements," Hodges said. "Everybody is working hard to find the capability that we need."

While the Army steps up its rotational forces, the troops stationed in Europe also are critical, he said.

German Soldiers drive a Wiesel A2 TOW track vehicle during exercise Saber Strike, in Rukla, Lithuania on June 11. The Army is looking to regionally align more troops to Europe, and that will mean more training alongside allies. (Photo: Sgt. Jarred Woods/Army)

"The Army's going to have to cut 40,000 people," he said. "The fact that the Army still protected the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the 2nd Cavalry Regiment and most of the things we still have in theater, I think that is a very, very strong endorsement by the Army that the capability we have that's forward stationed is very important."

Those forces are "an ocean closer" to Europe, Africa and the Middle East, Hodges said.

"I'm old enough to remember when there were literally 300,000 Army [personnel] here," he said. "Now there's 30,000."

This smaller force means a busier force, Hodges said.

"Our op-tempo right now is about double than what we normally would be," he said.

The Stryker regiment is putting as many miles on their vehicles as they would during a National Training Center rotation, "but they're doing it month after month after month," Hodges said.

The Army also relies on the National Guard and Army Reserve for critical enabler capability, he said, "to make our 30,000 feel like 300,000."