

# THE TURN AWAY FROM EUROPE

REBALANCING U.S. FORCES IS INEVITABLE—  
AND A THREAT TO WORLD STABILITY

BY JOSEF JOFFE

**I**T ALMOST GOES UNNOTICED that the United States is closing a long chapter in its Atlantic history. For 70 years, since the landing in Normandy, America was literally a power-in-Europe, with a vast military presence stretching from Naples to Narvik and from Portugal to Germany. At its peak, the entire force, Navy and Air Force included, numbered 300,000. The Army topped out at 217,000. At the end of this year, the ground troops will have dwindled to 30,000. A massive

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support structure of American grand strategy is being dismantled. Why is no one weeping or gnashing teeth?

That would have been the response in decades past. From the Korean War onward, when the United States deployed hundreds of thousands to the peninsula, Europeans perpetually nourished a nightmare that the United States, abutting both the Atlantic and Pacific, would abandon them in favor of Asia. To reassure them, the Eisenhower administration dispatched six divisions to the Continent after 1950, promising to keep them there for as long as it took to build up NATO and win the Cold War. This permanent expeditionary force, fortified by thousands of tactical nuclear weapons, held steady for a half century, and even grew when the Soviets ratcheted up the pressure. Yet the angst was ever-simmering, stoked by perennial Senate resolutions demanding a drawdown. And it would roll

whenever America's attention shifted to other locales.

It threatened to bubble over during the Vietnam War, when the United States deployed a half-million men to Indochina. It frothed again as the Middle East became a focus, first during the Six-Day and Yom Kippur Wars, then after the triumph of Khomeinism in Iran. Almost from the start, the terrifying possibility of "rebalancing," as the idea of redeploying American military assets is now called, was never far from the minds of European geopolitickers.

Still, throughout it all, Europe remained at the center of American foreign policy. The U.S. commitment, shrinking only slowly, survived the fall of the Berlin Wall and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But now, the wolf is at the door. At the beginning of 2012, there were a mere 41,000 troops left; at the end of this year, two more armored brigades will have been pulled out.

Given that the American military presence will virtually be gone from Europe by the time the president-elect puts his hand on the Bible in January 2013, the silence on either side of the Atlantic is astounding. Rebalancing is an about-face of historic proportions. With its vast military presence, America had become a European power after World War II. Now, U.S. grand strategy has finally shifted to the Greater Middle East, to East Asia, and to the Western Pacific. Why is no one wringing his hands? For a number of reasons—some sensible, and some not.

**E**UROPE is no longer the strategic fulcrum of the world, as it was when Soviet troops were encamped at the gates of Hamburg before Moscow's East European empire collapsed. There are no strategic threats as far as the eye can see. Europe now worries about invading refugees, who flooded in from the former Yugoslavia during the Balkan wars of the 90s. These have been followed most recently by Libyans escaping civil war in their country. More will come if the Maghreb implodes. Tanks cannot stop them.

The United States is no longer obsessed with Russia. The heirs of Stalin and Khrushchev will not soon recover the superpower status they lost on Christmas Day 1991, when the Soviet Union committed suicide. The action now begins at the Syrian border, moving east and south into the Levant, Arabia, and Egypt, thence to Iran and the new "Great Game" in Afghanistan. Another piece is in the former Soviet South, with its oil- and gas-rich "-stan" countries. But the main stage of the 21st century will be China and the Western Pacific.

Measuring 5,000 miles, the arc from the Eastern Mediterranean to the South China Sea will be what Europe was during the Cold War, nay, for centuries: the central arena of great power rivalry. The two key players will be the United States and China; one the reigning superpower, the other the would-be number one. In structural ways, the contest will resemble the American-Soviet one: sea power vs. land power, top dog vs. challenger, liberal democracy vs. one-party rule. And in other ways, it will not.

There will not be a million men on either side of the divide that was the Elbe River, as was the case for four decades in Europe, for no such line exists. Washington and Moscow shared virtually no ties, save mutual fear and loathing; the United States and China are linked by myriad dependencies, ranging from trade via investment to 50,000 Chinese students in American universities. Both have much more to lose from a conflict, hot or economic, than did the U.S. and the USSR. Mutual deterrence is strong, and it rests on more than the nuclear balance of terror.

Nonetheless, the new geopolitical game is on. The U.S. is playing by the rules of 19th-century Great Britain, harnessing allies from Canberra to Hanoi, projecting naval power, and weaving a far-flung net of containment. In fact, America is becoming a lot more British in its strategy than it was during the 20th century, when it frequently dispatched large land armies to the four corners of the earth.

In the 21st century, the tools of choice will be agile intervention forces, both conventional and special; blue-water navies; long-range bombers; unmanned aerial vehicles operated at a safe remove; and a globe-encircling network of moderately small bases. Like Britain's coaling stations of yore, which supplied the navy worlds away from Newcastle, these bases will anchor the supply chains at sea and in the air. Meanwhile, China is increasing its military budget at double-digit speed, seeking an "area denial" capacity first and intercontinental reach next. So regional allies must be reassured and Chinese ambitions held in check. Clearly, a rebalancing makes sense for the U.S. because it now has different strategic fish to fry. And the shift does not make European leaders reach for Xanax; Europe needs its big brother much less now.

This is the upside of the new world. But what of the condition of the old world? To begin with, it all depends on what we call "Europe." The chunk we used to worry over most is indeed more stable than it has been for centuries. This is "Core Europe," stretching from Portugal to Poland. But extend this heavenly sphere, and trouble looms. The fringes are brittle:

the Balkans; former Soviet possessions such as the Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan; the Levant with Iraq next door and the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Turkey, now ruled by Islamists, is the joker—sometimes with, sometimes against the West.

EUCOM, the U.S. headquarters, is in charge in all of Europe, the former Soviet Union, and, not to forget, Israel. Its mission is “to conduct military operations...to enhance transatlantic security.” Given the sheer size of the arena, this task is not going to be so easy for America’s dwindling forces. It will be even harder considering that the Europeans have virtually bowed out of the great power game. When Nicolas Sarkozy’s France leapt into Libya in 2011, dragging the rest minus “no-more-war” Germany along, Obama, “leading-from-behind,” had to fly to the rescue, supplying the high-precision ordnance as well as space-based and battlefield surveillance. A decade ago, the Europeans learned they could not bomb even Serbia into submission without the U.S. Air Force.

And when Syria went off the rails, it was off-limits from the start. For Europe, no more of what men once sang in London’s music halls during the Russo–Turkish

neighborhood. If the next American president, Obama or Romney, also “leads from behind,” he may find a bunch of listless indigents milling around front. Leading from behind like a shepherd assumes that the flock is already on the move. Europe’s sheep only want to graze. Leading from behind is not how collective action works among people or among nations.

**I**T IS THE OLDEST STORY in the world. When it comes to producing “public goods” such as international security, there always has to be somebody who organizes the posse and shoulders the largest burden—recall Gary Cooper as Marshal Will Kane in *High Noon* (though fail he did). President Obama is no such sheriff. And it is not clear whether Mitt Romney would restore the Marshal Kane ethos. He, too, would have to bring down the astronomically high federal deficit, and after the departure of Indiana’s Republican senator Richard Lugar and Joseph Lieberman—an ex officio GOPnik—there won’t be too many Europeanists left in the Republican establishment.

There are hawks like John McCain, Marco Rubio, and Lindsey Graham, but they are globalist birds

**THE UNITED STATES IS NO LONGER OBSESSED WITH RUSSIA. THE HEIRS OF STALIN AND KHRUSHCHEV WILL NOT SOON RECOVER THE SUPERPOWER STATUS THEY LOST ON CHRISTMAS DAY 1991, WHEN THE SOVIET UNION COMMITTED SUICIDE. THE ACTION NOW BEGINS AT THE SYRIAN BORDER, MOVING EAST AND SOUTH INTO THE LEVANT, ARABIA, AND EGYPT, THENCE TO IRAN AND THE NEW ‘GREAT GAME’ IN AFGHANISTAN.**

War of 1877–78: “We’ve got the ships, we’ve got the men, and got the money, too!” The Europeans have none of the above, certainly not the long-range air and naval power. Never mind the distant “halls of Montezuma”; they can’t even fight for six months on the “shores of Tripoli” right across from Sicily, let alone in Syria. Damascus is twice as far from the South of France as the Libyan desert is. While the U.S. still spends about 4 percent of gross domestic product on defense, the Europeans are down to 1. Nor do they have the mental software or the financial capacity to integrate force as an element of their grand strategy. Only France and Britain retain some of the reflexes and remnants of Europe’s ancient warrior culture. Once the master of the universe, Europe has become the Saint Bernard of world politics: toting lots of mass and economic muscle, but lacking the spunk of an attack dog.

The upshot is that Europe is neither equipped nor eager to police its increasingly turbulent (and truculent)

of prey. Behind them, Ron Paul isolationism is flapping its wings. The main enemy is “big government at home,” Paul has thundered. “We cannot talk about fiscal responsibility while spending trillions on occupying and bullying the rest of the world.” The GOP that once spearheaded Eisenhower’s boots-on-the-ground commitment to Europe and later united behind Bush *père et fils* in the wars against Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, is threatening to divide along the classic axis of isolationism vs. interventionism. Romney doesn’t seem to have a grand international vision, and no wonder. America’s agenda is to repair itself after four years of intractable unemployment in the 8 percent range, flanked by a trillion-dollar deficit and a federal debt heading for the record set in World War II, when it peaked at 120 percent of GDP.

But is America truly in decline—the same decline the doomsayers have been shouting about ever since the Soviets were first in space with Sputnik in

1957? Its economy is more than twice the size of China's, its per-capita income 10 times higher. China's fabulous growth rates have begun to shrink, as such rates always do once an economy leaves its lowly beginnings behind, whether they play catch-up or start-up. Consider the fate of the "economic miracles" in West Germany, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. Add to this historical experience the prospect that China will be old before it will be rich. By 2050, America will be the youngest nation among all those slated to evict number one from the penthouse of global power, save India.

America's military establishment dwarfs anything seen in history ever since Rome fell to the Germanic tribes. No other country has the same global reach: The U.S. can launch B-52 bombers in Missouri, drop their loads on Afghanistan and Iraq, and return home in one fell swoop. China, Russia, and India are regional powers; Europe is a Saint Bernard empire; and Japan, stagnant since the 90s, is an American security client.

For now.

**WHAT IS THE MORAL OF THIS TALE? YOU CAN SAVE SOME MONEY BY PULLING OUT OF EUROPE. BUT THAT IS NOT ENOUGH TO REMAIN MR. BIG IF OBAMA'S BUDGETARY AX KEEPS CHOPPING AWAY AT THE PENTAGON. IT ISN'T CHEAP TO BE AN XXL BRITAIN, NOT IN A WORLD WHERE THE LOCALS CAN FIGHT BACK WITH STATE-OF-THE-ART WEAPONS AND DETER AMERICA FROM MAKING GOOD ON ITS COMMITMENTS.**

**T**HE PENTAGON'S BUDGET for fiscal 2013 is set at a shade above \$600 billion, down from \$650 billion in 2012—a hefty, but not a murderous, cut. The real mayhem lurks down the line. Obama and Congress agreed last summer to reduce spending by \$450 billion in the coming decade. Another \$600 billion will be cut automatically through a "sequester" unless Congress devises an alternative. This means there will be \$100 billion less in the annual total as far as the budgetary eye can see, unless...

But the "unless" is hardly heartening. Even if Romney wins, it will be easier to rob the Pentagon than the modern American entitlement state, where government spending at all levels has breached 40 percent of GDP—close to the European average of 45 percent.

So the darkening defense future is the nub of the matter; the number of brigades in Europe is just one chapter of the story. It would have been nice to keep the

men and materiel on the Continent, not for nostalgic but for sound, strategic reasons. Europe is simply closer to the theaters where the U.S. might need to fight tomorrow—from the Maghreb to the Mashrek. Forces in situ are even better for *not* having to fight; they are there for *deterrence*. And deterrence will be needed. Russia will not let go of its designs on the Ukraine or pesky Georgia or oil-rich Azerbaijan. Iran will keep threatening its neighbors. The chance that the Arab Spring will bring democracy, jobs, and domestic peace to the Arab world is slim. Ready forces next door would sober those tempted to follow Henry IV's advice to his son and successor: "Therefore, my Harry, / Be it thy course to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels." Exporting strife is a classic of beleaguered regimes.

But America-in-Europe is almost history. It's the "Air-Sea Battle" now—the name of the new American strategy. It's off-shore balancing with an over-the-horizon presence. This is how Britain, the first liberal empire, did it, besting the Spaniards, Dutch, and French for three centuries, from the victory over the Armada in 1588 to Nelson's triumph at Trafalgar in 1805. The

economy of power was a British specialty, Albion's navies delivering a bigger bang for the quid than land armies did. Unfortunately, Air-Sea Battle won't be the steal that budget busters conjure up, especially in view of Russia's and China's rapid rearmament.

And so back to the nub. If the defense-budget bloodletting initiated by Obama continues into the next decade, the United States, too, will no longer be able to sing "We've got the ships, we've got the men." Think of the challenges facing the country in the immediate and near-term futures.

First, think what it would take to disarm Iran before it gets the bomb. It would take weeks just for the preliminaries: Lay low the air defenses, unravel the command-and-control network, eliminate Iran's air and naval assets that threaten tanker traffic in the Gulf. Then more weeks for destroying the primary targets, up to 50 of them and some, like Fordow, are protected by 200 feet of rock. Each site would require multiple bombing runs, again and again, to make sure they

are down and out. All the while, the U.S. would have to demonstrate ample escalation dominance to dissuade the Khameinists from opening other fronts elsewhere, against Israel or Saudi Arabia.

Now shift to the Western Pacific. One scenario would be a melee in the South China Sea, where Beijing contests everybody else's claims. Another would be a pitched battle in the Taiwan Straits to nix a Chinese invasion. The speed at which China is adding to its coastal and naval potential suggests that the U.S. might soon be deterred from intervening on behalf of Taipei—thus putting to an end the best-laid Air-Sea Battle plans to pin down China. If Washington can no longer reassure its allies, they will slip from its embrace.

What is the moral of this tale? You can save some money by pulling out of Europe. But that is not enough to remain Mr. Big if Obama's budgetary ax keeps chopping away at the Pentagon. It isn't cheap to be an XXL Britain, not in a world where the locals can fight back with state-of-the-art weapons and deter America from making good on its commitments. This election is like no other since Harry S. Truman's watershed victory in 1948. Having reversed post-VJ Day disarmament by 1947, Truman had a mandate of sorts to set the United States on the road to global leadership. The same mandate was assumed by the next batch of presidents, Republican and Democrat alike. The results of 2012 will shape the future of American power in the same way. The outcome will either speed up the slide or slow it (don't count on Romney to be another Reagan who went off to outarm the Soviet Union). But whoever wins, the U.S. would be ill advised to try and out-Brit the Brits with their over-the-horizon strategy. The UK didn't really care about Europe, except to make sure

that it would never fall into the hands of a single potentate like Napoleon. Having done the work, Britain pulled out again.

America *should* care. After all, who else is there? The cowardly Saudis? The indifferent Indians? The faraway Australians? This is how the *Economist* put it earlier this year: "While the feeble defense efforts of too many NATO members riles Americans, the organization remains the only vehicle that reliably provides partners when America wants to do something and does not want to do it on its own." But the Europeans won't do it unless led from the front. And leadership requires *being there*, as a power-in-Europe that keeps the NATO machinery humming. The 27 nations of the European Union, mired in crisis and economic stagnation, will not take care of the strategic business of a region that is still as important to the United States as is East Asia.

Also, more than purely strategic interests are at stake. America and Europe constitute the largest trade and investment relationship in the world; together they are good for more than half the global GDP. NATO is the chain that holds it all together. At age 63, NATO is the longest-lived alliance among independent nations, and its longevity certifies its worth. NATO has built a precious edifice of command and training, never mind all the family spats since 1949. It is the world's anchor of liberal democracy, nothing to sneeze at on a planet where the real thing remains either shaky or remote. Yes, the 21st century's central arenas will be the Middle East and the Western Pacific; so rebalancing it has to be. But the Atlantic is home. Home is boring and exasperating, yet, in the words of Robert Frost, it is also the place "where they have to take you in." 