



By: TA Analysis

What Washington really wants from its European allies



General Alexis Grynkewich, Supreme Allied Commander Europe and commander of US European Command, took part in a key phase of the review of future US military deployments on the continent.

A **virtual briefing** with Elbridge Colby, the Pentagon's top policy official, covered the process that is expected to produce at least four options for Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

According to an internal **Pentagon document** obtained by Reuters, those options are to be prepared by 6 November, before the six-month review ends in December.

No decision has yet been made on a large-scale withdrawal of the approximately 80,000 US troops from Europe, nor has Hegseth said that this is the aim of the process.

However, the criteria set by the Pentagon reveal much more than speculation about the final number of troops.

Washington no longer views its **European presence** solely through the lens of the Russian threat, NATO's ability to defend its members, or the percentage of GDP that allies spend on defence.

The calculation now also includes access to territory, the use of **bases and airspace**, defence procurement, political readiness to support US foreign policy priorities, and the cyber, space and intelligence infrastructure that enables US forces to operate far beyond Europe.

That is the essence of the review. The Pentagon is assessing not only how many American soldiers should remain in Europe for its defence, but also which European bases, airports, ports and other infrastructure would enable the US to act quickly in the Middle East, Africa and other regions outside Europe.

Five per cent is only the beginning of the calculation

For years, the dispute within NATO has mainly concerned how to share the financial burden.

At the summit in The Hague in 2025, the members accepted the obligation to allocate **five per cent of GDP** to defence and security by 2035, of which at least 3.5 per cent is for basic military needs.

NATO states that European members and Canada increased core **defence spending** by more than \$139 billion in 2025 alone.

This shift is substantial enough that it is no longer plausible to claim that nothing has changed in European budgets.

At the same time, American strategy is changing. The **National Defense Strategy** released in January 2026 explicitly states that European allies are strong enough to assume primary responsibility for the conventional defence of Europe, with critical but more limited support from the United States.

The Pentagon is seeking to free up capacity for the Indo-Pacific and other obligations

The Pentagon is therefore seeking to free up capacity for the Indo-Pacific and other obligations, without abandoning European deterrence or the American nuclear umbrella.

The new review introduces a far more specific criterion for that strategic commitment.

The Pentagon has sent a **questionnaire** to the allies requesting information on restrictions on US access, basing and overflights, the reasons for these restrictions and governments' willingness to ease them.

The assessment also covers military purchases from US companies, defence industry cooperation and the willingness of allies to support broader US security goals.

This is why two countries that spend the same percentage of GDP on defence no longer have the same value in the US military calculus.

One may offer bases, logistics corridors, communications and intelligence infrastructure that Washington can quickly use, while the other may have serious military capabilities but much stricter political conditions for making them available for US operations. The Pentagon is now openly measuring that difference as well.

Iran has shown what European bases really mean

The war with Iran has turned access from an administrative detail into a key criterion for alliances.

When he announced the review on 18 June, **Hegseth criticised European allies** who, during the conflict, did not allow the use of certain bases or airspace for US operations.

He said that the future arrangement must ensure dependable access to bases, the ability to deploy US forces and unimpeded overflights.

It is important, however, not to draw from this the false conclusion that Europe as a whole blocked US operations.

Just a week later, **Mark Rutte** stated that between 4,000 and 5,000 US flights had taken off from European bases in support of the operation against Iran, and he described the restrictions imposed by individual countries as isolated cases.

This combination explains why the issue is so important to the Pentagon. European infrastructure remained crucial for the American operation, but Washington saw at the same time that host countries' political decisions could limit its use at any given moment.

The Pentagon is now trying to determine where the US presence is reliable enough to be incorporated into long-term military planning

NATO **membership** on its own does not solve that problem. The use of bases and airspace for operations other than the Alliance's collective defence depends on bilateral arrangements, national law and decisions by the host government.

The Pentagon is therefore now trying to determine where the US presence is reliable enough to be incorporated into long-term military planning.

This changes how US bases in Europe should be viewed. Their value does not stem solely from their proximity to Russia.

Europe's airports, ports, warehouses, command centres, intelligence systems and communications networks enable Washington to support operations in the Middle East and Africa, and to move forces quickly between different commands.

The Pentagon's document therefore considers, within the same framework, the cyber, space and intelligence infrastructure that supports the global projection of US power.

The Pentagon is changing the logic of its presence in Europe

This dynamic also clarifies the concept that Mark Rutte calls 'NATO 3.0'. Its essence is not American abandonment of the continent, but a redistribution of responsibilities within the Alliance.

European members should assume more conventional defence, increase production, close capability gaps and take on more command roles, while the United States maintains a long-term military presence and a central role in nuclear deterrence.

For Washington, such a model only makes sense if European infrastructure remains a reliable platform for wider American interests.

In June, Rutte expressed this with unusual bluntness, describing Europe as a platform

that allows the United States to project power.

A reduction in US troop numbers, should it occur, would not automatically mean a proportional reduction in Europe's strategic value to the United States

That perhaps explains the essence of the current Pentagon review more clearly than the debate over how many **American troops** will remain deployed in Europe.

If European militaries assume responsibility for much of the continent's land and conventional defence, Washington gains scope to reduce some of the forces currently dedicated to tasks that European allies can manage themselves.

However, bases, logistics hubs, command facilities, intelligence infrastructure and locations with trusted access rights may at the same time become even more important.

A reduction in US troop numbers, should it occur, would therefore not automatically mean a proportional reduction in Europe's strategic value to the United States.

Congress has limited the scope for an abrupt cut

The Pentagon does not have a completely free hand. The final **National Defense Authorization Act** for fiscal year 2026 restricts the use of authorised funds to reduce the US military presence in the European Command area below 76,000 personnel until the Secretary of Defense and the EUCOM commander submit the required assessments and certifications to Congress.

After that, 60 days must pass. Similar safeguards apply to certain bases, major military equipment and the eventual relinquishment of the US post of Supreme

Allied Commander Europe.

It is far more realistic to expect a controlled redistribution than a politically spectacular emptying of American bases

It is not a ban on changing the schedule, nor can Congress guarantee that the current structure will remain intact. It is, however, a serious institutional obstacle to a sudden large-scale retreat.

The Pentagon must demonstrate that the change is in the American national interest, assess the consequences for NATO and its own military plans, and involve Congress in the process.

That is why it is far more realistic to expect a controlled redistribution than a politically spectacular emptying of American bases.

This is precisely where the most likely outcome of the review, which should be completed by the end of the year, lies.

Geography of the US presence

The administration has a clear strategy in which Europe must assume much of its conventional defence, the Pentagon wants to preserve capabilities for other regions, and Congress has set limits that make radical cuts difficult.

At the same time, the war with Iran showed that the US ability to use European bases is not a side benefit of the NATO but an operational asset that Washington intends to factor in.



It is more likely that the Pentagon will adjust the composition and geography of the US presence than change its basic purpose – Pete Hegseth

Therefore, it is more likely that the Pentagon will adjust the composition and geography of the US presence than change its basic purpose.

Forces that European militaries can gradually replace will face greater pressure to be reduced or redeployed, while locations that offer reliable access, logistics, command, intelligence capabilities and the ability to act quickly across multiple regions will have a strong case for remaining important in US planning.

The final decision has not yet been made, and there is not enough data to responsibly identify the countries that will emerge from the review with more or fewer US forces.

The change already visible is in the criterion itself. Washington is no longer asking simply how much a European ally spends on its defence, but what its territory, infrastructure and political decisions enable the US military to do when a crisis occurs outside Europe.

If that criterion is incorporated into the final schedule, the Pentagon's 2026 review will be remembered not primarily for how many US troops leave or stay, but for changing how the United States calculates the military value of its presence in Europe.