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The Biden Administration's Global Posture Review

Washington Seeks to Expand US Military Presence in Indo-Pacific without Neglecting Europe

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In the end of November, the US Department of Defense presented key findings of its Global Posture Review (GPR). Addressing current and future developments across the US's global military presence, the Posture is highly relevant for America's allies. With the GPR, the Biden administration reaffirms its commitment to strengthening NATO; however, the elements of the Review that have so far been published leave important questions unanswered – in particular, how the priorities between Europe and Asia will be set in the long-term and whether new land-based weapons systems will be stationed in European NATO states.

The Global Posture Review was initiated by US President Joe Biden in February this year with the aim of examining the size, capabilities and role of US troops worldwide in light of fundamental geopolitical shifts. Another part of the Review relates to legal agreements with host countries that regulate military access.

The GPR remains classified. However, many of the key points that have now been publicly announced concern decisions that the Pentagon had already disclosed earlier this year. Moreover, the GPR is obviously not meant to mark the end of a process; indeed, the Department has already declared that it will continue to make further decisions in the coming weeks and months. Moreover, the results of the exercise will inform the National Defense Strategy,

which is expected to be released in early 2022. In this way the GPR can be viewed as also informing the future course of the Biden administration's defence policy.

The GPR revises decisions made by the Trump administration which had irritated some in the summer of 2020, especially those in Germany. While the reduction of US troops in Germany is now off the table, the Review exhibits significant continuity of the US's more recent defence priorities. Its presence in the Indo-Pacific shall be moderately strengthened without reducing its contributions to NATO. With regard to the Middle East, the GPR reiterates the US's goal of reducing its military presence there.



The Force Posture in Light of a Changing Security Landscape

The geopolitical and geostrategic context of the US's global military presence has fundamentally changed over the last few years and even decades. The most serious shift is seen in the US's intensifying rivalries with China and Russia, coupled with their growing military capabilities. Beijing and Moscow have invested heavily in armaments designed to deny the US and its allies access to and freedom of action in their respective regional neighbourhoods.

This is particularly true in view of the increasing number, speed and accuracy of medium-range (500 – 5,500 km) ballistic and cruise missiles, as well as unmanned systems. Although these developments have preoccupied Washington for at least two decades, the problem has recently become much more acute.

The great powers are also competing for access to the global operational domains of cyberspace and outer space. In view of the advancing digitalisation of both the global economy and armed forces, as well as the lowered technological threshold for access to space, both domains have become increasingly relevant for security and defence policy.

For the US, this means the weakening of a central assumption of American defence and alliance policy held for the past thirty years; namely, that the US has the ability to militarily dominate any region and any theatre of operation whenever it deems necessary. For the United States, this means nothing less than having to (re)think “defence without dominance” (Christian Brose).

The US's shift of priorities to the Indo-Pacific also plays an important role. This region differs from the European theatre in sheer size, its maritime character and in the fact that the US does not have a comparably dense and institutionalised network of allies there as it has in Europe.

Against this background, defence planners in Washington are thinking hard about how the US can diversify its presence

in the Indo-Pacific beyond its few but large military bases. The aim is to become less vulnerable to Chinese missiles. For the same reason, the US also wants to better protect American bases on the Pacific island of Guam, in South Korea and in Japan against missile attacks with appropriate defence systems. This is also a challenge for US bases in Europe.

The complete withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan reflects the will of the last three US administrations to end large-scale stabilisation missions – and to avoid them in the future. This, however, raises the question of how (by drone, combat aircraft, special forces, intelligence services) and from where (bases in Central Asia or in the Arab Gulf states) Washington can conduct the fight against terrorism in the future. The Global Posture Review should have also provided answers to these questions – but so far there is little indication that it actually does.

Geopolitical shifts have also fuelled debates in the US on the future course of the country's security and defence policy. On the one hand, an increasingly audible minority in Congress, the government apparatus, think-tanks and in the US media see themselves confirmed in their view that a wise defence policy under the new circumstances requires a “retrenchment”, and thus a reduction of the US military presence. According to this view, the US should concentrate on its core national interests while at same time reducing its military vulnerabilities abroad.

On the other hand, advocates of “deep engagement” continue to be a majority in the administration, in Congress and in the think-tank world. They believe that exactly because of power shifts and rising tensions the US must remain present worldwide – albeit with an adjusted footprint. In other words, their aim is to prevent the loss of military dominance – both through defence investments in key technologies and through closer cooperation with formal allies and other like-minded partners.

Key Points of the Global Posture Review

The Biden administration has clearly opted for “deep engagement”. Biden himself has repeatedly emphasised that he wants to revitalise US alliances and the Global Posture Review reflects this aim.

Not surprisingly, the GPR identifies the Indo-Pacific as a priority region and China once again as the “pacing threat”. Washington continues to rely on its large overseas bases. Infrastructure on Guam is to be expanded and better protected against China’s medium-range ballistic missiles. The US military presence in South Korea is also to be strengthened by permanently stationing combat helicopters and an artillery headquarters there; until now, both were only stationed there temporarily.

In addition, the US wants to expand its presence in Australia and thus deepen its defence partnership with the country. Among other things, Washington wants to send fighter planes and bombers to Australia more frequently. Furthermore, it wants to expand its defence cooperation with Pacific island states. So far, however, officials at the Pentagon have only pointed to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, which, located north of Guam, is not an independent state but an unincorporated US territory.

As part of their security competition, the US and China are struggling for political influence among the Pacific island states. In the context of GPR, the Pentagon again stated its aim of hardening and diversifying its military infrastructure (logistics centres, fuel and ammunition depots, airfields) in the Pacific region. In the past, these efforts have only seen limited success, making the US’s approach to Australia as a security partner all the more important.

The GPR indicates that President Biden, like Trump and Obama before him, wants to reduce the American footprint in the Middle East. So far, however, his administration has not indicated a concrete way it will do so. As long as the nuclear dispute with Iran remains unresolved, it will be

difficult for Washington to significantly reduce its military presence in and around the Persian Gulf.

The Pentagon still has not clearly said where and how the US intends to use the resources that were freed up by the withdrawal from Afghanistan. The fight against terrorism, especially against the “Islamic State” (IS), remains a core concern of Washington even after the withdrawal. In the future, the US will presumably come to increasingly rely on partners in the global anti-IS coalition and on local forces in Syria, Iraq and African states.

As far as the US’s military presence in Europe is concerned, the Biden administration has reversed decisions made by the previous administration in the summer of 2020 that made waves in Germany. At that time, Trump wanted to cut the number of US soldiers in Germany by almost 12,000 – to 25,000 – and then cap them at this level. The 2021 GPR not only takes this off the table, but moves in the opposite direction: the Biden administration now wants to increase the American presence in Germany and other European NATO states.

The Pentagon is now refraining from closing several locations in Germany. Some of these sites serve as US Army storage facilities. In the Pentagon’s view, such “prepositioned stocks” are becoming increasingly relevant in times of growing tension between great powers.

In addition, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin already announced during his visit to Berlin in April this year that he would strengthen the US military presence with two new components. Taken together, these would mean an increase of about 500 American soldiers stationed in Germany.

The new components are, firstly, elements of a so-called Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF), a new type of US Army unit that is intended to enable networked action across all operational domains (i.e. on land, at sea, in the air as well as in space and cyberspace). According to the Army’s plans, these task forces will be composed of several battalions, including one with long-range artillery, missiles or cruise missiles.

In total, the Army wants to create five such units, one of them explicitly for Europe. The exact size and configuration of the MDTF in Europe do not seem to have been determined yet; and the deployment of only a few hundred soldiers indicates that the initial focus is largely on command and planning capabilities.

What is significant, however, is that — at least according to their blueprint — these task forces are to be equipped with two new land-based, non-nuclear weapon systems. The so-called Mid-Range Capability (MRC) is developed on the basis of the existing Standard Missile 6 (SM 6) and the Tomahawk cruise missile and will have a range of between 500 and 1,500 km. The MDTF will also be equipped with a new land-based hypersonic missile — the Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW) — which would have a range of more than 2,700 km. It is aimed for both weapon systems to have an operational prototype by 2023.

The second new element that Austin announced for Germany in April is complementary to the MDTF. It is a headquarters that would coordinate the use of missiles of different ranges between the different branches of the US armed forces as well as between NATO allies in the event of war (Theatre Fires Command). The US Army reactivated the 56th Artillery Command for this purpose in November. Its predecessor existed from 1986 to 1991 as the European Command of the US Pershing missiles.

The Global Force Posture Raises Important Questions for Germany

The outcomes of the Global Posture Review underpin President Biden's public aim to revitalise US-led alliances in Europe and Asia after four years of a Trump presidency. It is obvious that Washington seeks to bolster this commitment with a continued, sizable military presence. Nevertheless, the GPR raises key questions for Germany and other European NATO partners.

For example, the GPR does not cover some important topics. A senior Pentagon

official stressed that the process had not specifically dealt with the issues of cyberspace, space and nuclear weapons. In this context, she referred to the publication of the National Defense Strategy as well as the next Nuclear Posture Review, both expected to be released in early 2022.

During the election campaign, Biden promised to reduce the importance of nuclear weapons within American defence policy. Should this come to pass, however, the question arises as to whether conventional forces would have even greater significance to ensure deterrence against Russia. This could mean, for example, that larger US or NATO forces would also be permanently stationed in the eastern flanks of the alliance.

In the context of the conventional military balance, long-range land-based weapon systems, which were prohibited by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty until 2019, are also becoming increasingly relevant from the US perspective. In their modernisation efforts, the US armed forces, especially the Army, rely on long-range precision fires (LRPF). These include the above-mentioned mid-range capability and the new hypersonic weapon.

Deployment decisions are still pending, however. From the US perspective it would make little sense to develop such weapons without later also wanting to station them in Europe, which would require the consent of the respective host country. The new German government of Chancellor Olaf Scholz could thus face difficult decisions in the not-too-distant future.

So far, NATO has only ruled out stationing land-based, nuclear-armed missiles in Europe. But non-nuclear-armed, land-based missiles and cruise missiles could be an important contribution to effective deterrence in the future, considering Russia's accelerated arms build-up. At the same time, however, these weapons carry the risk of inciting further arms races and escalation in times of crisis.

Finally, despite its vision of an emboldened US presence in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, the GPR seems to be mostly oriented

towards the status quo. The Pentagon is largely sticking to its existing posture in the strategically relevant regions of the world and avoiding hard decisions that could upset allies in those regions. Biden wants to meet the growing challenge from China without neglecting the deterrence of Russia. In light of Russia's recent bellicose behaviour around Ukraine, he reiterated that the US would support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the non-NATO country. In the event of a renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine, Washington has not only threatened tough sanctions against Moscow but also an expansion of its military capabilities within eastern NATO states.

Despite these strong signs of support for European security, it is by no means certain that Washington can maintain its current security role both in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific in the medium and/or long-term. The US faces the triple challenge of a high budget deficit, economic fallout from the Coronavirus pandemic and enormous expenditures that are to be mobilised to modernise the country's infrastructure and social system. In the military sector, there are still major problems with the operational readiness of the armed forces, while at the same time significant modernisation efforts are pending.

In 2012 under the Obama presidency, the United States let go of the pretension that it would be able to defeat Russia and China at the same time if war broke out in Europe and Asia. And as time went on, it has become increasingly clear that the US will prioritize the Indo-Pacific as it views China as its greatest challenge.

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