



Insight

Reassuring European Allies and Detering the Russian Threat

RACHEL HOFF, ASHLEY NELLE-DAVIS | FEBRUARY 11, 2016

One of the most significant policy shifts in the president's Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 [defense budget](#) request is a major commitment of resources to Europe. In light of Russia's creeping aggression, this increased funding will help maintain peace and stability, strengthen important alliances, and secure American interests in Europe and around the world.

In his preview of the president's budget, Defense Secretary Ash Carter [outlined](#) the five evolving challenges that informed the direction of the FY 2017 defense budget request. At the top of the list was the growing threat of Russian aggression, followed by the rise of China in the Asia-Pacific, North Korea, Iran, and the ongoing fight against terrorism. Countering a revanchist Russia has reemerged as a priority to protect U.S. interests in Europe, reassure European allies, and reinforce the power of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance.

The administration's budget request for FY 2017 includes \$3.4 billion for the [European Reassurance Initiative](#) (ERI), up from \$789 million in [FY 2016](#). Quadrupling this funding will allow the United States to bolster its alliances with Russia's closest neighbors. This initiative will help ensure that, together, the United States and its allies are prepared to deter future Russian aggression on the continent as well as respond to crises in the Middle East and North Africa.

The ERI funding increase would provide for an increased U.S. troop presence in Europe, a greater number of bilateral and multilateral military exercises, and capacity building with partner countries – notably those in Central and Eastern Europe on Russia's doorstep.

The Army will receive the largest share of ERI funds. Of the \$2.8 billion allocated for the Army, \$1 billion would go towards sending an [armored brigade combat team](#) consisting of 3,000 to 5,000 U.S. troops. Representing the first increase of U.S. troop levels in the European theater in decades, this new brigade will concentrate its rotations along NATO's eastern border.

While the increased ERI funding will promote a larger American military force in Europe, that presence will still be [far from what it once was](#). As recently as 15 years ago, there were six U.S. Army brigade combat teams in Europe. President Bush reduced that to four brigades, and President Obama took it down to the two brigades that remain today. Reintroducing the additional brigade is a necessary but ultimately insufficient response to the renewed Russian threat in Eastern Europe.

On the whole, the [dwindling U.S. defense budget](#) is out of step with the increasingly dangerous world America faces. Bolstering funding for the European Reassurance Initiative is a bright spot in an otherwise fairly gloomy defense budget picture. With Vladimir Putin testing the strength of the NATO alliance, the United States and our European partners must stand firmly against Russian expansionism. Funding initiatives like this is an important step toward deterring further Russian aggression in Europe.