

Fact Sheet

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History

U.S. European Command (EUCOM) was established Aug. 1, 1952 to provide "unified command and authority" over all U.S. forces in Europe. For several years after World War II the services had maintained separate commands in Europe that reported directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Air Forces in Europe; Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Naval Forces, Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean (later became U.S. Naval Forces, Europe); and Commander-in-Chief, U.S. European Command (later became U.S. Army, Europe).

America's rapid post-war demobilization, followed by the end of the occupation of Germany in 1949, led many to question the U.S. commitment to the defense of Western Europe against the Soviet Union. The period saw a sense of looming crisis in the West about how to provide for the common defense, especially after the Berlin Crisis of 1948-49, when the Soviet Union blocked access to the divided city and the U.S. and United Kingdom responded with an unprecedented airlift. In 1949 the allies established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but did little else to meet their new commitments.

In June 1950 the United States and its allies were jolted into action by the surprise attack on South Korea by Communist North Korea. Early in 1951 NATO established Allied Command Europe and the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower was called from retirement to become the first Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).

The U.S. continued to defend Korea, but simultaneously sent massive reinforcements to Europe to deter the Soviet Union from similar aggression there. Between 1950 and 1953 U.S. military personnel in Europe grew from 120,000 to over 400,000. U.S. Air Forces in Europe grew from three groups with 35,000 personnel to eleven wings with 136,000 personnel. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean doubled to more than forty warships. U.S. Army Europe grew from one infantry division and three constabulary regiments to two corps with five divisions (including two mobilized National Guard divisions), and in November 1950 activated a new field army, Seventh Army, at Patch Barracks in Stuttgart, Germany. The Army activated the 10th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg in 1952 and deployed it to Bad Tölz in November 1953 for unconventional warfare missions behind the Iron Curtain.

To provide for national command within NATO, and to help control this build-up of forces, Gen. Eisenhower proposed a separate command for all U.S. forces in Europe. Because the senior U.S. commander would continue as Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Eisenhower recommended giving "a maximum of delegated authority" to a four-star deputy.

Eisenhower returned to the United States just as the new command was established. The first U.S. Commander-in-Chief Europe (USCINCEUR) was Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, former commander of Eighth Army and the Far East Command during the Korean War. His deputy was Gen. Thomas T. Handy, former Army deputy chief of staff under Gen. George C. Marshall and commander of U.S. Army, Europe.

Headquarters EUCOM initially shared the I.G. Farben Building in Frankfurt, Germany, with Headquarters U.S. Army, Europe. In 1954 the headquarters moved to Camp des Loges, a French Army base west of Paris and a short distance from SHAPE. There, EUCOM prepared plans for the defense of Western Europe within the NATO framework against the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact. EUCOM used the Military Assistance Program to help its NATO partners build their military capabilities, including the German Bundeswehr after 1955. In 1955 EUCOM established a Support Operations Command Europe, soon renamed Support Operations Task Force Europe (later became SOCEUR) for special operations missions. EUCOM also assumed responsibility for command and control of U.S. nuclear forces. In 1961 EUCOM began operating an airborne command post, Operation Silk Purse.

The Cold War was marked by continued tensions with the Soviet Union, including widespread unrest in Eastern Europe following the death of Joseph Stalin. EUCOM also conducted out-of-sector operations such as a major contingency operation to Lebanon in 1958. In 1961 Berlin once again became a flashpoint when the Soviets erected a wall to stop the hemorrhage of people fleeing Communist rule.

In the early 1960's, sharp policy disagreements emerged within NATO, and in 1966 France demanded the removal of all U.S. and NATO headquarters and forces from French soil. The following year SHAPE moved to Mons, Belgium, while Headquarters EUCOM moved to Patch Barracks. Headquarters Seventh Army moved to Heidelberg, where it merged with Headquarters U.S. Army, Europe. At Patch Barracks EUCOM renovated the buildings, built a new operations center, modernized communications infrastructure and improved the airfield.

EUCOM continued to prepare for the defense of Europe and began a series of annual REFORGER (Return of Forces to Europe) exercises in 1967 to reassure its allies. Cold War crises continued, including the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. But the readiness of U.S. forces in Europe slowly declined due to the Vietnam War and balance of payment problems. Troop strength in Europe fell to 265,000 by 1970.

During the 1970's, force protection concerns in Europe grew as terrorist groups such as the Red Army Faction and the Red Brigades targeted U.S. facilities and personnel with bombings, kidnapping and assassinations, and Palestinian groups brazenly conducted terror operations in Europe, such as the kidnapping of Israeli athletes during the 1972 Munich Olympic Games.

During the 1970's, the Cold War appeared to mellow into an era of détente and negotiations, but tensions remained high as both sides modernized their conventional and nuclear forces. In the late 1970's the Soviet Union deployed SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles into Eastern Europe and in 1979 invaded Afghanistan. NATO responded with a "two-track" decision to step up negotiations while deploying U.S. intermediate-range Pershing II missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles to counter the Soviet threat.

During the 1980's, the armed forces began to recover from the Vietnam War and U.S. forces in Europe grew to over 350,000. EUCOM established Fleet Marine Force Europe (later MARFOREUR) in 1980. The unified command plan was changed in 1983 to transfer responsibility for the Middle East from EUCOM to a new combatant command, U.S. Central Command, but EUCOM retained responsibility for the "confrontation states" of Israel, Lebanon and Syria. At the same time EUCOM was formally assigned responsibility of Africa, south of the Sahara.

The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, together with a powerful Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Colin L. Powell, who served from 1989-1993, further strengthened the role of combatant commanders. Goldwater-Nichols also established U.S. Special Operations Command, which led to the activation of a new sub-unified command, Special Operations Command, Europe.

During the 1980's, negotiations continued with the Soviet Union on strategic and theater-level arms limitation. In 1987 the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty called an end to the deployment of SS-20's, Pershing II's and GLCM's. In 1990 NATO and Warsaw Pact members signed a treaty on conventional armed forces in Europe (CFE).

In 1989, the Soviet Union and its empire in Eastern Europe collapsed and the Cold War came to an end. The citizens of a reunified Berlin tore down their wall. As a sign of reduced tensions, in 1991 EUCOM took its airborne command post off alert. Meanwhile in 1991 EUCOM and its components provided forces to CENTCOM for another out-of-sector operation, Desert Storm.

EUCOM reached out to the emerging democracies through programs such as the Joint Contact Team Program, NATO Partnership for Peace and the National Guard Bureau State Partnership Program. It was also active in peace and stability operations in the Balkans, including Bosnia, Macedonia and Kosovo. But it had to conduct these new missions with fewer assigned forces as its strength fell below 120,000.

Immediately after the terrorist attacks against New York and Washington on Sep. 11, 2001, NATO invoked Article V of the treaty and deployed a NATO early warning aircraft to help monitor the skies over North America. EUCOM provided major forces for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and stepped up its efforts to protect U.S. interests in Europe and Africa. Subsequent terrorist attacks in the EUCOM theater in Casablanca, Madrid, London and Algiers made it clear that terrorism demanded a collective response. EUCOM worked to build partner capacity in Europe and Africa for peacekeeping operations and deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. EUCOM launched Operation Enduring Freedom and Trans-Sahara in 2007 while continuing to provide rotational forces to Afghanistan and Iraq.

As EUCOM's challenges evolved, so did its missions and functions. In 2003 the headquarters reorganized to establish the EUCOM Plans and Operations Center. From 2006-2008 it helped stand-up a new unified command, U.S. Africa Command, which took over responsibility for Department of Defense activities in Africa on Oct. 1, 2008.

For more than half a century EUCOM has helped keep the peace in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. As it transforms for the future, it will continue to meet new challenges.