

Stronger Together

KRZESINY AB, POLAND

Thousands of US military personnel are regularly deploying to Central and Eastern Europe to train with allies and deter Russia, as there are very few US forces based here. In Poland, for example, the entire permanent US operational military presence consists of 11 USAF airmen assigned to Łask AB, Poland.

The 52nd Operations Group's Det. 1, the "AvDet" as it is colloquially known, works with the Polish air force on a daily basis at three central Poland air bases—Krzesiny, Łask, and Powidz—laying the groundwork for cooperation and ensuring USAF has a "warm base" ready, come exercise season or war.

The detachment turns five in November, and few would have predicted in 2012 how important it would become. Then, in 2014, Russia invaded Ukraine and illegally seized the Crimean Peninsula.

Russian aggression understandably worries NATO's Eastern members, most of whom spent half a century under Nazi and/or Soviet domination—or were completely absorbed by the Soviet Union and ceased to exist as independent nations. Needless to say, Russia invading neighboring nations and seizing territory does not sit well on NATO's eastern frontiers.

Today there is an alphabet soup of US and NATO initiatives to promote stability: Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP), the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), Operation Atlantic Resolve (OAR), and theater security packages (TSPs), not to mention air policing and the National Guard State Partnership Program. All serve overlapping purposes.

"The United States has demonstrated not merely with words, but with its actions, that we stand firmly behind Article 5," said President Donald J. Trump in a July visit to Warsaw, Poland. "Words are easy, but actions are what matters." This was an overdue but

essential endorsement of NATO's all-for-one philosophy, and the President was spot-on about the importance of actions.

The US has indeed taken significant action to support its Eastern European allies. US funding for ERI initiatives has grown at breakneck pace. What was a \$789 million training, deployment, and exercise program in 2016 is expected to grow to a \$4.8 billion investment in 2018. Regular air policing missions defend the airspace of vulnerable allies, and theater security packages send combat-ready USAF units forward to work with and defend allies.

A recent visit to Lielvarde Air Base in Latvia during Saber Strike showed USAF C-130s practicing wartime delivery skills. The 435th Contingency Response Group was there as well, operating out of tents, exercising its ability to set up a bare base in combat conditions.

One high-profile move has a mechanized infantry battalion with armored fighting vehicles and towed artillery—1,000 US Army soldiers in all—populating a combat-ready NATO battle group in northeast Poland. Similar battle groups, manned by other nations, rotate through the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, shoring up the defense of these nations in Russia's shadow.

A little US commitment goes a long way in Central and Eastern Europe.

In June, Saber Strike and Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) exercises were in full swing south and east of the Baltic Sea. Łask Air Base was closed to flight operations, as Poland and the United States make major improvements to the runway, ramps, and weapons storage areas, so Det. 1 was hosting four KC-135 tankers and eight F-16s at Powidz and Krzesiny instead. Airmen from each of the deploying units lauded the ease with which they were able to deploy to Poland and begin flying without missing a beat.

Lt. Col. Kristofer Padilla, Det. 1 commander, told *Air Force Magazine* the unit has a US European Command mandate to host four quarterly aviation detachment rotations per year, bringing F-16s and C-130s. Det. 1 is "absolutely dependent upon the Total Force ... to make those deployments happen," Padilla said. In other words, while USAF relies on the AvDet for successful deployments, the arriving forces also ensure Det. 1 can continue to keep the door open at the Polish bases.

In an all-out war, a handful of USAF fighters over Latvia or 1,000 soldiers in Poland will not defeat a Russian invasion. They will, however, serve as a tripwire—a symbol of US commitment that should prevent Russia from attacking in the first place.

As one BALTOPS participant noted, many civilians in Eastern Europe still "have an underlying fear we won't come" if their nation is attacked by Russia. This makes the US presence in northeast Europe mutually beneficial. High profile, public partnerships like those on display this summer in Poland and Latvia build up US skills, reassure vulnerable allies, and keep Russia in check. That's a win all the way around.



USAF F-16s fly a mission for BALTOPS and Saber Strike, multinational exercises in the Baltic region. Such exercises bolster Eastern Europe's confidence in the US.