

# MILITARY BASES OF THE GREAT POWERS IN THE BALKANS IN FUNCTION OF REALIZATION OF THEIR GEOSTRATEGIC INTERESTS

Zlatko KUZMANOV<sup>1</sup>Goran ZENDELOVSKI<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *In 2006, the U.S. started to implement strategic plans to strengthen their military presence in South-Eastern Europe by restructuring and deploying U.S. forces. With these plans they intended to gradually abandon the concept of establishing large military bases far from potential conflict zones, and establish instead smaller military bases closer to locations where the US Army forces can be used. This was formalized by signing defence cooperation agreements (DCAs), as the one with Poland, as well as with the new NATO member countries, Romania and Bulgaria. This strategic commitment was also confirmed by the 2010 National Security Strategy, which provides strategic guidance for repositioning sites and positioning part of their military bases on European territory. Thus, they partially repositioned from the developed countries of Western Europe to the so-called poor regions of “new Europe” - Romania, Poland and Bulgaria. The main reason for this is to confront the countries which support terrorism. Moreover, with this approach the emphasis is again on security policies, which should ensure realization of national political and economic interests.*

## Introduction

Contrary to the estimates over the past two decades, the Balkans is again in the focus of the U.S. strategies for their enhanced military presence in the region. Namely, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the U.S. administration strategic priorities were clearly directed towards gradually transferring the responsibility to the EU member states to decide on their own future as the U.S. increasingly turned their attention towards the Far East and the Pacific. This determination was influenced by the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S., then the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the circumstances of China’s rapid economic growth, and in particular the consequences of the 2007 global financial crisis (which also affected the Pentagon budget cuts).

However, the changes that have taken place in the world over the last decade, such as the rapid economic growth and China’s enhanced economic presence in Europe, the effects of Europe’s energy dependence on Russian gas, the Arab Spring, Russia’s aggression in Georgia and Ukraine, the emergence of ISIS, the terrorist attacks in Europe, the war in Syria, the migrant crisis and the strengthening of Russia’s and China’s military capabilities, have forced the U.S. and other world powers to shift their previously set strategic goals and priorities regarding international politics and security. Thus, the Balkan countries, i.e. South Eastern Europe, became once again a priority for the U.S. and NATO Alliance to build and strengthen their defence and security capabilities.

With the repositioning of forces and bases in South Eastern Europe, the Pentagon intends to establish “Eastern Europe Rotational Brigade” based primarily in Romania and Bulgaria, which will have air and logistics capabilities needed to successfully support its operations.<sup>34</sup> The brigade is estimated to have between 3,000 and 5,000 combat personnel and logistic support units. Prior to the deployment of these US forces, the U.S. insists on signing precise agreements that will allow them to have access to their forces at the bases and regularly use and deploy them to military operations in other countries, crisis regions and war zones. This is important for the U.S. as they have been taught by their own experience with Turkey which, as a host country, disagreed with the intention to deploy the U.S. armed forces stationed at the Incirlik military air base in Iraq.

Under the new U.S. strategy, the 2018 military budget provided significant funding (\$200 million) for reorganization, redeployment and refurbishment of the military (primarily air bases) on European territory (Iceland, Norway, Luxembourg), and especially in South Eastern Europe (Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria). The restructuring of U.S. military capabilities in Europe is also coordinated with NATO Alliance. We

<sup>1</sup> PhD Zlatko Kuzmanov is an officer at the rank of colonel, employed in the Army of the Republic of Macedonia. The views expressed in this paper are personal views of the author and are not related to the institution he is part of.

<sup>2</sup> PhD Goran Zendelovski is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy-Skopje, Institute for Security, Defence and Peace

<sup>3</sup> www.slobodnaevropa.mk. „HATO отвора командни центри во Источна Европа“, from

<sup>4</sup> .02.2015.

emphasize that most of the U.S. military bases, especially on European territory, are also declared for NATO requirements. Russia's aggression on Ukrainian territory has only accelerated the Pentagon and NATO plans. For this reason, the Defence Ministers of NATO member countries reached a decision in February 2015 to extend the Alliance military presence in Eastern European countries in order to protect the Allies. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg confirmed this intention in 2017, noting that NATO would establish new military bases in the Baltic states, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria.<sup>5</sup> As we have mentioned, for the most part these are the same military bases used by the U.S. Army which operate in NATO as multinational commands, headquarters and control centers. These headquarters should help NATO lead a "rapid reaction force" that will respond to threats against NATO member countries or to defend them from attack.<sup>6</sup>

Due to the importance and sensitivity of the Balkan region, we will herein provide more detailed data and estimates on the positioning and repositioning of U.S. and NATO military presence in the Balkans. The analysis of the existence and the role of the U.S. and NATO military bases on the territory of the Balkan countries is given chronologically, from the opening of the first bases to the current situation.

## Military bases in the Balkans

### Turkey

In 1951, the U.S. Army began building the Incirlik military air base near the city of Adana, Turkey.<sup>6</sup> Initially, the air base was planned to be used in emergency and for servicing medium and heavy bombers. The agreement between Turkey and the U.S. to use the base was signed in 1954, while in 1980, a new Defence and Economic Cooperation Agreement was signed. Currently, there is around 1,500 military and civilian personnel deployed at the base. The main unit is the 39th Air Base Wing whose mission is to support and protect the U.S. and NATO forces throughout Turkey and the southern NATO region. The air base is used as an Air Force Regional Training Centre, as a U.S. National Military Command Centre for this region and as a support to different units (medical services, supply, security and force protection, transport services, air transportation, personal services and more). This air base, together with the U.S. 728th Air Mobility Squadron, provides about 70% of all airfreight and personnel transport for the units involved in the international mission in Afghanistan.

Izmir military air base is the second U.S. Army and NATO base on Turkish territory.<sup>7</sup> The U.S. military presence in this air base began in 1952, with the admission of the Allied Land Forces Southeastern Europe and the deployment of the Allied Tactical Air Forces in 1953. Since 1956, the U.S. Air Force in Europe has claimed responsibility for U.S. and NATO forces at this base. The Allied Air Command in Izmir in 2012 was replaced by the NATO Allied Land Command, as part of the NATO Allied Command Operations.

In recent years, we have witnessed a strain on the bilateral relations between Turkey and the U.S., caused by a number of factors. First, because of the U.S. support for Kurdish fighters in Syria, known as

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<sup>5</sup> [www.mk.voanews.com](http://www.mk.voanews.com). Accessed on 01.11.2018.

<sup>6</sup> On the territory of some NATO member countries, there are declared and established military bases (primarily air bases), which, in addition to serving their national armies, they are also used for the needs of the NATO Alliance. **The U.S.**, as the leading NATO country, has established military bases in some NATO member and other countries and are also used for NATO purposes. The network of military bases consists of about 30 bases positioned in the following states: Whiteman Airforce Base, Missouri, USA; RAF Fairford, Gloucestershire, UK; Lakenheath and Mildenhall Air Base, UK; Eindhoven Air Base, The Netherlands; RAF Brüggen, under the jurisdiction of the British Army in Germany; Geilenkirchen Air Force Base, Germany; Landsberg Air Base, Germany; Ramstein Air Base of the U.S. Army in Germany, which is also the command of the U.S. Air Force for Europe and Africa and also the NATO Joint Air Command; Spangdahlem Air Base, U.S. Army and NATO in Germany; Istres Air Base, France; Avord Air Base, France; Morón Air Base (Morón de la Frontera), Spain; Naval Station Rota, belongs to the U.S. Army, and Spain, Spain; Jedi-Brescia Air Base, Italy; Aviano Air Base, belongs to the U.S. Army and NATO, Italy; Vicenza Base, belongs to the U.S. Army and Italy; Piacenza Air Base, Italy; Istrana Air Base, Italy; Trapani Air Base, Sicily, Italy; Sigonella Air Base, Sicily, Italy; Pratica di Mare Air Base, Lazio, Italy; Ammenola Air Base (Amendola), Italy; Gioia dell Colle Air Base, Italy; Grazzanise Air Base, Italy; Brindisi Air Base, U.S. Army in Italy; Incirlik Air Base, U.S. Army and Turkey, Turkey; Eskan Village

“People’s Defence Forces”. Another reason is the U.S. protection of the religious and political leader Fethullah Gulen, whom Turkey considers the organizer of the failed military coup in Turkey in 2016. Following the failed military coup, Turkey temporarily blocked the operation of the Incirlik base. However, restrictions on using the U.S. military base were also in place in 2003, when

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Air Base, U.S. Army, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Ali al Salem Air Base, U.S. Army and Kuwait, Kuwait.

Source: [www.terra.es/actualidad/articulo/htm](http://www.terra.es/actualidad/articulo/htm). Accessed on 28.10.2018.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.incirlik.af.mil/>. Accessed on 10.10.2018.

<sup>7</sup> <https://lc.nato.int/about-us/history>. Accessed on 10.10.2018.

the Turkish parliament did not allow it to be used for attacks on Iraq. Namely, under the agreement between Turkey and the U.S., the U.S. military is allowed to use the Incirlik air base in the framework of NATO operations. When the U.S. aims to conduct independent military operations, they need an additional approval by the Turkish parliament to use the base. Such restrictions on operations are disliked by the U.S., and this is one of the indicators (besides the rapprochement of Turkey with Russia in the military area) that to some extent influenced the decision to reposition some military bases on the territory of Romania, Bulgaria, and even Greece. It can be noted that the U.S., when signing mutual defence cooperation agreements with these countries, insists that there are no such restrictions on the use of their force.

## **Greece**

The U.S. Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the island of Crete is the first U.S. military base on the territory of Greece.<sup>7</sup> Its operational use began in 1957, when the USS Alameda County amphibious ship was stationed at the port to support units on the island. Later, in 1969, a Navy Department was established as part of the U.S. Naval Air Force in Siljonella, Sicily. This department included the Mobile Blasting Group, Liaison Centre and other facilities. It was established as a military naval and air support base in 1980 and acts as an operational naval base, naval air base and naval armament station. This means that the base supports both naval and aviation reconnaissance missions and other allied operations, as well as multinational operations for the needs of the U.S. Army’s European, Central and African Command. Several operational commands are stationed here, such as: Naval Chief Computer and Telecommunications Station, Scout Squadron, Naval Ammunition Centre, External Intelligence Centre, U.S. Naval European Meteorology and Oceanography Squad, NATO Maritime Interdiction Operational Training Centre and others. About 800 U.S. military and civilian personnel are stationed at Souda Bay, ensuring combat readiness of the deployed units.

In recent years, the U.S. Army and NATO forces have also temporarily used other military airports and ports in Greece to carry out various operations. Such is the case with the Larisa Air Base and the Alexandroupolis Naval Base.

## **Cyprus**

Due to the important geostrategic position of the island of Cyprus, we provide data on the existence of military installations on this island. The island of Cyprus, as it is known, is located in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea and is the third largest island, following the Italian islands of Sicily and Sardinia. The island is administratively and politically divided into two parts: the Republic of Cyprus, which is internationally recognized and a member of the EU and NATO Alliance, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is recognized only by the Republic of Turkey. However, one part of the island is a British territory acquired in 1960 by signing the Treaty of Independence with Greece and Turkey. Under British sovereignty is the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, which occupies about 254 square kilometers or 2.8% of the island’s territory and primarily serves for military purposes. The Royal Air Force

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.naval-technology.com>. Accessed on 12.09.2018.

Akrotiri is in the western sovereign area, while the Aios Nikolaos military electronic and intelligence base in Dhekelia is in the eastern sovereign territory.<sup>8</sup> Akrotiri Air Base is a joint operational base providing support to British forces operations in the region of the Middle East and North Africa and at the same time protects the strategic interests of the UK in the wider region. The military electronics and intelligence base of Aios Nikolaos in Dhekelia serves to gather intelligence on developments in the wider region. It stations the 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment and the 33<sup>rd</sup> Royal Air Force Liaison Unit of the United Kingdom.

### **Hungary**

On the territory of Hungary, the Papa Air Base is in operational use since 2009, located 130km west of Budapest.<sup>9</sup> The base is used by the U.S. Army and the NATO Alliance for Multinational Strategic Air Transport. Along with other aircraft, several F-17 Globemasters transport aircraft are also stationed here, intended to transport larger units and assets to Afghanistan and other distant countries and regions. Another military base used by U.S. and NATO forces is the Taszar Air Base, near the city of Kaposvar. From 1995 to 1999, the U.S. Army used this base to conduct air operations in the Balkans (BiH, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo). From 1998 to 2004, the base was used as a National Support Centre for the U.S. Army, and from 2001 to 2003 it served as a training base for Iraqi Army personnel. According to available data, there are no foreign troops in this military air base since 2004.

### **Kosovo**

Bondsteel is a U.S. Army military base opened in 1999, following the end of the NATO intervention on Serbian territory. It is located near the city of Urosevac, not far from Kosovo's border with Macedonia. It is intended to station and accommodate up to 7,000 troops, who would be responsible for the security of Kosovo and the region. During the construction of the base, it served to safeguard the existing (and especially future) energy flows planned to extend from the Caspian Sea through Turkey, the Balkan countries to Italy. Such was the AMBO project, a US sponsored oil pipeline, according to which the Burgas port in Bulgaria was planned to be connected with the Vlora port in Albania, passing through the territory of Macedonia. During 2011, there were rumours of a possible closure of this base, but developments on the world stage have refuted such predictions. Bondsteel now has about 1,000 members of the reserve and National Guard soldiers. The military base also houses the command of the KFOR Multinational Battle Group East, composed of troops from the 79<sup>th</sup> US Infantry Brigade Combat Team and units of the Armed Forces of Hungary, Poland, Romania and Turkey.<sup>11</sup>

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From the presented data we can see in which Balkan countries, when and with what purpose were military bases opened in the past. However, as we emphasized at the beginning of this paper, the Balkans is covered by the new U.S. (and NATO) strategic movements for repositioning of locations and deploying part of Europe's military bases, or their partial relocation to South Eastern European countries. For these reasons, we continue by providing data on such claims, covering Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and Greece.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.raf.mod.uk/our-organisation/stations/raf-akrotiri/>. Accessed on 11.10.2018.

<sup>9</sup> [www.nspa.nato.int/en/organization](http://www.nspa.nato.int/en/organization). Papa Air Base - Main Operating Base. Accessed on 11.10.2018.

<sup>11</sup> <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/kfor>. Accessed on 09.11.2018.

## **Restructuring, rebuilding and building military bases in South Eastern Europe**

### **Romania**

Intensive defence cooperation between the U.S. and Romania began in April 2006 by signing the interstate agreement in Bucharest. The agreement also provides opening several U.S. military installations and bases on Romanian territory. This agreement became operational in 2018. According to Pentagon's current plan to fund military bases, \$21,000,000 will be provided for modernization of Mihail Kogalniceanu US-Romanian military air base near Constanta.<sup>12</sup> The air base also has Patriot missile defence systems designed to protect Europe from possible missile attacks from the Middle East and Russia. Also, 3,000,000 euros have been earmarked for 2018 to renovate Romania's Campia Turzii military airbase.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. Air Forces have already built hangars to house MQ-9 Reaper drones, and intelligence support facilities in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region.<sup>14</sup> In October 2014, the U.S. Naval Support Facility was opened in the town of Deveselu and it is part of the US-NATO Ballistic Missile Defence System.<sup>15</sup><sup>16</sup> The system command consists of a fire control centre, an auxiliary command group, a control and communications department, and SM-3 missile launcher facilities.

### **Bulgaria**

The same year as in the case of Romania, a Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed in Sofia in April 2006 between the Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ivailo Kalfin and the U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.<sup>17</sup> The agreement contains articles that provide for the deployment and status of forces, unrestricted U.S. access to their forces, and more. The agreement envisions deploying about 2,500 U.S. troops and equipment in several U.S. military bases on Bulgarian territory, i.e. at the Bezmer Air Base in the Yambol region, the Graf Ignatievo Air Base in the Plovdiv region, the Aytos Logistics Centre in the Burgas region, and the Novo Selo Training Area in the Sliven region. The agreement provides for significant U.S. financial resources to rebuild and modernize the aforementioned military bases. Also, according to the agreement, Bulgaria waives taxes and other financial obligations on all purchases at the U.S. military bases, as well as the jurisdiction over the U.S. troops in the event of criminal or misdemeanor offenses. This agreement was approved by the Parliament of the Republic of Bulgaria on 26 May, 2006, and on 6 June 2006 the Law on Ratification of the Agreement was adopted.

According to the Agreement, the modernization and equipment of the Bezmer Air Base was completed by the end of 2015. For this purpose, the U.S. and NATO invested 27,000,000 Euros, while Bulgaria invested 3,700,000 Euros. Modernization and expansion have made it possible for this military airport to land and take off US F-5 strategic military transport aircraft, such as the Galaxy F-17, the Globmaster F-17 and the smaller F-130 Hercules. Also by 2015, the Novo Selo Training Area was modernized with an investment of \$61,000,000. At this training range, 80 different military exercises between the U.S. and Bulgarian armies have already been planned.<sup>18</sup> Such large U.S. investments to establish permanent military bases in Bulgaria are part of defence investments of more than \$300,000,000 in the past 20 years.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> BalkanEngineer.com. Accessed on 18.04.2018.

<sup>13</sup> Balkan Engineer.com, Romania-Insider.com. Accessed on 18.04.2018.

<sup>14</sup> www.romaniajournal.ro/defense-news. Accessed on 12.11.2018.

<sup>15</sup> www.navy.mil/submit,,Navy Establishes New Base in Romania“, 10.10.2014. Accessed on .11.2018.

<sup>17</sup> www.state.gov. Accessed on 30.09.2018.

<sup>18</sup> www.balkaninsight.com. Accessed on 20.08.2018.

<sup>19</sup> https://bg.usembassy.gov. Accessed on 12.10.2018.

## A scheme of distribution of military bases in the Balkans



### Greece

Greece is also ready to expand military cooperation with the United States. Such talks were led by the Greek Defence Minister Kamenos during a meeting with the U.S. Secretary of Defence James Mattis at the beginning of October 2018. The same was announced by the U.S. during the visit of the Chief of General Staff of the U.S. Army, General Joseph Dunford to Athens in September 2018.<sup>20</sup> In addition to using the existing naval military base in Souda on the island of Crete, the expansion of U.S. cooperation would mean deployment of U.S. forces at the Volos Air Base near Arakos Air Base near Larissos, western Peloponnese, and at the Siros Air Base on the Siros Island, located 78 nautical miles southeast of Athens. Part of the cooperation to support certain military operations has been in place since early 2018, with the US-based Larissa military MQ-9 Reaper drones being temporarily used for deployment of the F-22 Raptor fighter jets.<sup>21</sup> This is the case with the Alexandroupolis Naval Base, located in the city with the same name in northeastern Greece, or the northern part of the Aegean Sea.

### A scheme of the locations of military bases in Greece



### Albania

The current trend of offering territories for U.S. military bases has not bypassed Albania either. Thus, during an official visit to the Pentagon in May 2018, the Defence Secretary Olta Chachka offered Secretary of Defence Mattis locations to open U.S. and NATO military bases in Albania.<sup>22</sup> Following the analysis

<sup>20</sup> www.ekathimerini.com. News, 05.09.2018. Accessed on 15.10.2018.

<sup>21</sup> Wall Street Journal Magazine, 13.09.2018. Accessed on 25.10.2018.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.mod.gov.al>. Ministria e Mbrojtjes, 12.11.2018. Accessed on 26.11.2018.

and observations at the Pentagon and NATO Headquarters in Brussels, the first information on opening a NATO air base in Albania was released in Tirana and Brussels in October 2018. In this regard, Albania's Defence Minister said the abandoned air base at Kucova was chosen as the future NATO air base in the region. For its reconstruction and construction, NATO plans to invest 50,000,000 Euros, and the base will be used for training, exercises, supply and logistics for the needs of the NATO Alliance.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

The U.S. remains a dominant political, economic and military force in the world. However, its leadership is seriously jeopardized by China's rapidly growing economic and military development, as well as by its continuing rivalry with Russia, especially in the military. Worldwide, the U.S. is the largest military superpower, allocating 3 times more than China and 10 times more than Russia for defence and military needs. This paper covers the extent and scope of the deployment of military bases and military installations of the U.S. (and NATO) primarily, dominating its main competitors. The focus of the paper was on the distribution and repositioning of military bases in the Southeastern European countries, more precisely in the Balkans. We can conclude that the U.S. has again shown its interest in enhanced military presence in the South Eastern European countries, with the aim of building an anti-missile defence shield and deploying forces and resources for the needs of the Eastern Europe Rotational Brigade. This made the not-so-recent announcement by senior U.S. administration officials that a "fire line" from Western Europe would be moved closer to the borders with the Middle East and Russia.

Analyzing the locations and distribution of the new U.S. military bases on the territory of Bulgaria, as well as the offers to open military bases in Greece and the marked-for-opening NATO military base in Albania, we can conclude that they are almost identically located along the approved and announced construction of gas and transport corridors in the Balkans. Namely, military bases in Bulgaria are located along the stretch of the Russian South Stream gas pipeline, as well as along the From-Sea-to-Sea Rail Freight Corridor, announced and approved by the European Commission, which will connect three ports in Greece (Thessaloniki, Kavala and Alexandroupolis), with three ports in Bulgaria (Burgas, Varna and Ruse on the Danube). Also, this new transport corridor through the territory of Greece extends along the established route of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline, which should transport gas from the Caspian Sea, through Turkey, Greece, Albania, to Italy. In the context of the aforementioned, it is not accidental that NATO decided to open a new military air base in Albania at the site of Kucova, located near the stretch of Trans Adriatic Pipeline going through the territory of Albania to Italy.

### A scheme of Balkan oil and pipelines



<sup>23</sup> <http://www.mod.gov.al>. Ministria e Mbrojtjes, 17.04.2018. Accessed on 06.07.2018.

### A scheme of the From-Sea-to-Sea Rail Freight Corridor<sup>24</sup>



The data analysis presented herein shows us that nothing is accidental in the big strategic games and that military power is always in the service of achieving economic and political interests of the great powers.

We can ask ourselves a logical question, “How does all this affect the position of our country?” The behavior and actions of our neighbors and other countries in the region are of great importance to our national security. In recent years, they have sought to strengthen their strategic and military alliance with the U.S. by unwritten agreements. We have seen that their enhanced military cooperation also includes offering territories to new U.S. and NATO military bases. The Republic of Macedonia, as a country that is making the final steps towards joining the NATO Alliance, and having signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership and Cooperation with the U.S. ten years ago, is not currently considered a location for opening U.S. and NATO military bases and is by-passed by the approved strategic pipeline and oil routes across the region.

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<sup>24</sup> Source: Trans-European Transport Network Executive Agency. European Commission, 2011.



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