

# Rebalancing NATO's Command

European Operational  
Responsibility and Transatlantic  
Defence

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# Abstract

Russia's sustained belligerence against Ukraine and NATO, combined with mounting expectations by the United States that European allies assume primary responsibility for the conventional defence of Europe, has triggered the largest rearmament effort among European NATO members since the late 1970s. At the same time, Washington has signalled its intent to preserve enduring strategic leadership within the Alliance, notably through extended nuclear deterrence commitments, key enabling capabilities and – at least for the time being – the continued US stewardship of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe position, which remains dual-hatted with that of Commander of the US European Command.

These parallel dynamics have revived long-standing questions about whether, how and on what timetable NATO's command arrangements should evolve to reflect Europe's growing ambition – and obligation – to shoulder a much greater share of the Alliance's collective defence. How can NATO enable European allies to assume far greater operational responsibility without undermining Alliance cohesion or the unique integrative role of US strategic leadership?

This CSDS In-Depth Paper traces the evolution of NATO's command and control architecture since the last comprehensive review of the NATO Command Structure in 2012 and assesses how future reform could reconcile these strategic imperatives. It argues that any rebalancing of command responsibilities must proceed in lockstep with the strengthening of European operational capacity on a multinational basis. To that end, the paper proposes a phased approach to NATO command and control reform before and after 2030, encompassing: 1) deeper multinational consolidation of European forces; 2) the relocation and realignment of selected NATO headquarters; 3) the progressive transfer of operational-level joint force commands to European leadership; and 4) a longer-term hand-over of operational-level domain-specific commands in the land, air and maritime domains. The result would be a more balanced and more capable Alliance – one that reflects greater European responsibility for conventional defence while preserving continued US engagement and strategic leadership.

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# Introduction

## A Changed Strategic Landscape

Europe now confronts a convergence of strategic pressures unprecedented since the end of the Cold War: Russia's large-scale war of aggression against Ukraine; Moscow's sustained military mobilisation and coercive posture *vis-à-vis* NATO, including an expanded array of hostile hybrid activities below the threshold of a collective NATO response; and a clear expectation on the part of the United States (US) that European allies rapidly assume a much greater collective share of responsibility for the Alliance's conventional defence. Together, these dynamics have reopened fundamental questions about how NATO organises, commands and fights.

Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and occupation of parts of eastern Ukraine in 2014, NATO has undertaken a far-reaching reset of its deterrence and defence posture. This effort accelerated following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and has culminated in the adoption of a new NATO military strategy, the development of the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) concept and the establishment of a new NATO Force Model (NFM).<sup>1</sup> Taken together, these initiatives define how Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR)<sup>2</sup> intends to deter and, if necessary, defend across the Alliance's expanded Area of Responsibility – from the High North and the North Atlantic to the Eastern Flank, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean – while specifying the forces, readiness levels and capabilities Allies are expected to provide.<sup>3</sup>

These changes have significantly strengthened NATO's deterrence posture. They have also highlighted a persistent imbalance at the heart of the Alliance. NATO's ability to conduct high-intensity, multi-domain operations continues to depend disproportionately on US capabilities and enablers, notably in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR); integrated air and missile defence; long-

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<sup>1</sup> See Alberque, W. "The History of NATO's Defence Plans (2014-Present): SACEUR and the Strategy Gap", The Geopolitics and Security Studies Centre, Vilnius, 29 October 2025; Covington, S.R. "NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area", Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2 August 2023; and Monaghan, S., Kjellstrom Elgin, K. and Bjerg Moller, S. "Understanding NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area", Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington, D.C., 20 May 2024; Deni, J. "The New NATO Force Model: Ready for Launch?" War series, No. 4, NATO Defense College, Rome, May 2024; and Montinari, V. "Rapid Response in a Changing World: The New Force Model (NFM) as a game changer for NATO readiness", FINABEL, Brussels, 11 March 2025.

<sup>2</sup> NATO's two strategic commanders are the SACEUR and the Supreme Allied Commander, Transformation (SACT), heading Allied Command Operations (ACO) and Allied Command Transformation (ACT), respectively. The headquarters of ACO and ACT are located at Mons (Belgium) and Norfolk, Virginia (US), respectively. The former is known as Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers, Europe (SHAPE).

<sup>3</sup> The NATO Force Model reportedly calls for the generation of 100 combined-arms brigades; 1,400 fighter aircraft and 250 surface combatants and attack submarines kept at high readiness. *Op.Cit.* "NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area".

range strike; space and cyber; strategic lift and sustainment; and advanced command, control and communications systems. This reliance is reflected in NATO's command arrangements, where US flag and general officers continue to occupy many of the most demanding operational-level command positions in order to ensure coherence between European and American forces.

At the same time, European allies have embarked on a major rearmament effort. If current defence spending trajectories are sustained, Europe's combined military capacity could increase substantially by the end of this decade. These gains, however, are neither automatic nor guaranteed. They depend on overcoming structural constraints related to industrial capacity, force generation, recruitment and retention, infrastructure and – critically – the ability to translate national investments into coherent multinational formations capable of operating at scale. Without deeper integration, additional resources risk producing parallel national capabilities rather than genuinely increased combined fighting power.

It is against this backdrop that calls for greater “European responsibility” within NATO must be assessed.<sup>4</sup> For European allies, assuming more operational responsibility is not only a matter of strategic autonomy or political signalling; it is also a practical necessity if US engagement and transatlantic cohesion are to be sustained.<sup>5</sup> For the United States, encouraging Europeans to lead more of NATO's conventional defence reflects both strategic prioritisation and the recognition that Alliance credibility ultimately depends on Europeans being able to fight effectively on their own continent.

These imperatives generate a central tension. Any rebalancing of command responsibilities must respect the foundational role of US strategic leadership within NATO, embodied in the position of SACEUR. This role is inseparable from US nuclear Command and Control responsibilities, extended deterrence commitments and reinforcement capabilities.<sup>6</sup> A symbolic redistribution of command posts that outpaces European operational capacity would risk hollowing out NATO's command structure, weakening deterrence and fragmenting the Alliance's chain of command.

This CSDS In-Depth Paper argues that NATO should therefore approach command reform as a capability-driven and phased process, rather than as an exercise in institutional symmetry. The key question is not who should hold which headquarters at what point in time, but how the Alliance intends to fight – and with what forces

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<sup>4</sup> Hooker Jr., R.D. “A New NATO Command Structure”, Issue Brief 5, Atlantic Council of the US, Washington, D.C., 5 June 2024; Zima, A. “*Reformer les commandements de l’OTAN. Entre européanisation, émergence de nouveaux leaders et rôle des États-Unis*”, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, Paris, 23 June 2025; Habendank, L., Loss, R. and Westgaard, K. “Look What You Made Us Do: How to Realise a European-led NATO”, European Council on Foreign Relations, London, 30 October 2025; and Vandiver, J. “US burden shift in NATO should mean more European 4-star leaders in command, report says”, *Stars & Stripes*, 4 November 2025.

<sup>5</sup> This In-Depth Paper did not consider the “flag-to-post” allocation of NATO operational-level command positions among European allies that would be associated with a hypothetical hand-over of such positions from American to European Flag Officer/General Officer (FOGOs), as explored here, nor Canada's legitimate share of that allocation.

<sup>6</sup> The delivery of these responsibilities and commitments has required the dual-hatting of the SACEUR as Commander, US European Command (USEUCOM) since the tenure of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SACEUR, General Matthew Ridgway, in 1952, when the US started to station large numbers of conventional forces and nuclear weapons in Europe permanently.

and enablers – under different plausible future force posture scenarios.<sup>7</sup> Command arrangements must follow from that logic.

To address this challenge, the paper proposes a four-step roadmap for rebalancing NATO's command arrangements over the coming decade:

- 1) strengthening European operational capacity on a multinational basis, including the consolidation of land, air and maritime forces into larger, more coherent formations capable of sustained high-intensity operations;
- 2) realigning NATO's joint force commands geographically and operationally, including the relocation of Joint Force Command Norfolk to Europe, to better reflect regional defence requirements and NATO's expanded northern and eastern theatres, while preserving robust US leadership in Atlantic maritime operations and reinforcement protection;
- 3) progressively transferring leadership of all three NATO Joint Force Commands to European flag and general officers<sup>8</sup>, as European forces become more capable of generating and commanding the necessary combat power; and,
- 4) considering, beyond 2030, a gradual European assumption of selected domain-specific commands (air, land and maritime), contingent on the maturation of European capabilities and experience in planning and leading large-scale joint multinational operations.

These steps are intended to proceed in lockstep with European force development and in close coordination with the United States. They are not predicated on a full US military withdrawal from Europe, nor do they assume that Europeans will rapidly replicate the full spectrum of US enablers. Rather, they seek to ensure that NATO's command arrangements remain credible, coherent and fit for purpose under conditions in which European allies are expected to carry much greater responsibility for the Alliance's conventional defence.

The sections that follow examine how NATO's current command arrangements emerged, why they are increasingly strained by the demands of collective defence and how a phased, capability-driven reform could strengthen both NATO's military effectiveness and its political cohesion in an era of renewed great-power competition.

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of different options regarding US force posture and defense strategy in Europe see Simón, L. and Boswinkel, L. "What if Hell Breaks Loose? Imagining a post-American Europe", *CSDS Policy Brief* 17/2025.

<sup>8</sup> The Joint Force Command located in Brunssum (The Netherlands) has always been led by a European general officer. In Step 2, European allies would take over command of the Joint Force Command relocated from Norfolk to the UK and in Step 3 the US would hand over the Joint Force Command located in Naples (Italy).

# Chapter One

## The Expeditionary Momentum: Strategic and Operational Implications of the 2012 Command Structure Review

When NATO initiated its pivot back to collective defence in 2014, its command arrangements still largely reflected the strategic assumptions and operational experience of the preceding two decades.<sup>9</sup> By then, NATO had become – through sustained practice – a deployable and deployed alliance, with forces under NATO command engaged in peace enforcement in the Balkans, counter-insurgency and mentoring in Afghanistan and maritime security operations extending from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. The command arrangements in place at the time were optimised for this expeditionary profile rather than for large-scale, high-intensity territorial defence in Europe.

The fourth revision of the NATO Command Structure (NCS), completed in 2012, was the most consequential of all post-Cold War reviews. It completed the transition away from NATO's original territorial-defence focus and embedded an expeditionary logic into the Alliance's command architecture. That blueprint remains highly relevant today, as it constitutes the baseline from which NATO's command arrangements have been incrementally adapted since 2014, in the absence of a subsequent comprehensive review.

At the heart of the 2012 revision lay four interrelated decisions.

First, NATO retained joint operational-level command of expeditionary operations within the NATO Command Structure through two Allied Joint Force Commands at Brunssum (The Netherlands) and Naples (Italy), while closing the smaller Allied Joint Command at Oeiras (Portugal). These Joint Force Commands were designed to command deployed operations beyond NATO territory, rather than to lead regional defence campaigns within SACEUR's Area of Responsibility.

Second, the disbanded Joint Command at Oeiras was replaced by the NATO multinational staff (STRIKFORNATO) associated with the US 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet. STRIKFORNATO is designed to provide NATO with a capacity to conduct high-end, US/allied multi-carrier operations and is placed directly under SACEUR's authority.

Third, the Allies disbanded the NATO Command Structure single-service, air, land and maritime component commands subordinated until then to the Joint Force Commands located in Brunssum and Naples and transferred responsibility for

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<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of NATO's evolving deterrence and defence posture and operational arrangements during and after the Cold War, see Ruiz Palmer, D. "NATO's Military Transformations, 1949-2024", in Olsen, J.A. (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of NATO*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2024): 79-92.



generating deployable air, land and maritime component headquarters to the NATO Force Structure (NFS). This shift effectively moved the burden of staffing, funding and sustaining component-level commands from NATO collectively to individual Allies and framework-nation groupings. In practice, it entailed the closure of long-standing land, air and maritime component commands in Heidelberg (Germany), Madrid (Spain), Izmir (Turkey) and Nisida (near Naples) and their consolidation into three domain-specific, Area of Responsibility-wide headquarters: Allied Air Command (AIRCOM) at Ramstein, Allied Land Command (LANDCOM) at Izmir, and Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) at Northwood.

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The command arrangements in place at the time were optimised for this expeditionary profile rather than for large-scale, high-intensity territorial defence in Europe.

Fourth, NATO significantly downsized its air command and control architecture by consolidating air policing and air defence responsibilities into two Combined Air Operations Centres (CAOCs) at Uedem (Germany) and Torrejón (Spain), supported by a deployable air Command and Control (C2) capability at Poggio Renatico (Italy), while returning eight former allied Combined Air Operations Centres to national control.

These reforms reflected a confluence of trends that had been developing since NATO's adoption of the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) concept in the mid-1990s.<sup>10</sup> One was the growing recognition that the large, standing Combined Joint Task Force headquarters originally envisaged were ill-suited to the most likely crisis-response and peace-enforcement missions. Another was the increasing reliance on rotational force-generation models, most notably through the NATO Response Force (NRF), which placed heavy – and often underappreciated – demands on NATO Force Structure national and multinational headquarters and support structures.<sup>11</sup> Finally, persistent pressure to reduce peacetime manpower and extract “peace dividends” reinforced the drive toward a slimmer, more deployable command structure.

From an expeditionary perspective, the 2012 reforms offered clear advantages. They reduced the peacetime footprint of the NATO Command Structure, improved

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<sup>10</sup> Barry, C.L. “NATO’ Bold New Concept: CJTF”, *Joint Force Quarterly*, Summer 1994: 46-54.

<sup>11</sup> Ruiz Palmer, D. “From AMF to NRF: The Roles of NATO’s Rapid Reaction Forces in Deterrence, Defence and Crisis Response”, *NATO Review*, spring 2009: 32-37.

NATO's ability to command deployed operations beyond Europe, and aligned command arrangements with the political and operational priorities of the time. However, they also carried significant costs for collective defence.

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**By divesting the Joint Force Commands of their organic air, land and maritime component commands, the 2012 design deprived them of the instruments required to lead large-scale regional operations in Europe.**

By divesting the Joint Force Commands of their organic air, land and maritime component commands, the 2012 design deprived them of the instruments required to lead large-scale regional operations in Europe. Operational control over domain-specific effects was effectively centralised at the strategic level, with AIRCOM, LANDCOM and MARCOM reporting directly to SACEUR. While this arrangement strengthened SACEUR's ability to orchestrate Area of Responsibility-wide effects in a major war scenario – particularly in the air and maritime domains – it left the Joint Force Commands without the subordinate command elements necessary to command the forward fight and bring land, air and maritime formations together in their respective regions. This design risked pulling SACEUR into an operational role, directing tactical and operational effects across domains and regions at the expense of his unique responsibility to provide strategic direction, maintain campaign coherence throughout his Area of Responsibility and manage escalation, including the interface with nuclear deterrence.

In sum, the 2012 NATO Command Structure review was predicated on the assumption that a large-scale war of conquest against NATO was highly unlikely, and that the Alliance's principal military challenge would lie in crisis response and stabilisation operations beyond its borders. Russia's actions in Ukraine from 2014 onward would rapidly invalidate those assumptions.

## Chapter Two

### From Deployed to Prepared: NATO's 2014 Pivot Back to Collective Defence

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its covert military intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014 confronted NATO with a strategic reality for which its command arrangements were only partially prepared. While the Alliance moved quickly to reassure exposed Allies and strengthen its forward presence, it soon became apparent that the expeditionary-oriented command architecture inherited from the 2012 review sat uneasily with the requirements of deterrence and defence against a peer adversary in Europe.

Initially, NATO's response took the form of incremental adaptation rather than structural reversal. The assumption persisted that adjustments to the existing command design would suffice. However, as Russia's military posture hardened – through the deployment of dual-capable missile systems, the expansion of high-readiness formations and increasingly complex large-scale exercises – the scale of the challenge became unmistakable. Commanding large, multi-domain forces under severe time pressure and in contested environments placed growing demands on NATO's command structure.

From 2018 onward, Allies therefore began to introduce a series of cumulative – and in some cases innovative – adaptations to the NATO Command Structure:

- 1) The establishment of the Allied Joint Support and Enabling Command (JSEC) in Ulm (Germany) marked a significant departure from past practice. For the first time, NATO created a standing command dedicated to the enablement of force movement, logistics and infrastructure across SACEUR's Area of Responsibility. This reflected the recognition that deterrence and defence in Europe depend not only on combat forces, but also on the Alliance's ability to move, sustain and reinforce them at speed and scale.
- 2) The activation in 2019 of a third Joint Force Command in Norfolk restored a regional operational focus on the North Atlantic and the High North – including, more recently, Finland and Sweden – re-establishing a function that had atrophied since the end of the Cold War, following the disbandment of the former Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT) command in 2003. At the same time, collective defence planning and command functions were strengthened at the Joint Force Commands in Brunssum and Naples, anchoring them more firmly in the execution of the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area Concept and the new Regional Plans approved at the NATO summit in Vilnius in 2023, with Joint Force Command Norfolk oriented to the North Atlantic and the High North, Joint Force Command Brunssum to the Baltic and Central European segments of the Eastern Flank

and Joint Force Command Naples to NATO's Black Sea and Mediterranean regions.<sup>12</sup>

Subsequent decisions further reinforced this trend.

- 3) The appointment and dual-hatting in 2022 of the Commander of US Army Europe (USAREUR) as NATO's Commander, LANDCOM restored a long-standing Cold War command relationship between the US Army and European land forces, while bringing NATO's land command function closer to the Central European theatre.
- 4) The transformation of NATO Special Operations Headquarters into an Allied Special Operations Forces Command (SOFCOM), and its dual-hatting with US Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR), strengthened NATO's ability to integrate special operations into joint and combined campaigns.
- 5) The disbandment of the NATO Response Force in 2024 and its replacement with the Allied Reaction Force reflected a shift away from rotational crisis-response constructs toward a more scalable and enduring readiness model.
- 6) The decision to establish a third Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) at Reitan (Norway) further aligned NATO's air command arrangements with the demands of high-readiness collective defence, particularly in northern Europe.
- 7) The creation of a dedicated Cyber Operations Centre at SHAPE and a Space Centre at Allied Air Command in Ramstein acknowledged that modern deterrence and defence depend on the integration of effects across all operational domains.

Taken together, these changes marked a clear departure from the downsizing logic that had characterised the 1994-2012 period and reflected a renewed willingness to invest in standing command capacity.

Currently, Joint Force Commands Naples and Norfolk, as well as AIRCOM, LANDCOM, Allied Special Operations Forces Command and STRIKFORNATO, are led by US flag and general officers, while Joint Force Command Brunssum, Allied Joint Support and Enablement Command and MARCOM are commanded by European flag and general officers (see Figure 1). This distribution reflects an enduring principle of NATO's command arrangements: while European allies contribute extensively to regional planning and force generation, ultimate responsibility for operational-level command in key geographical areas and capability domains –

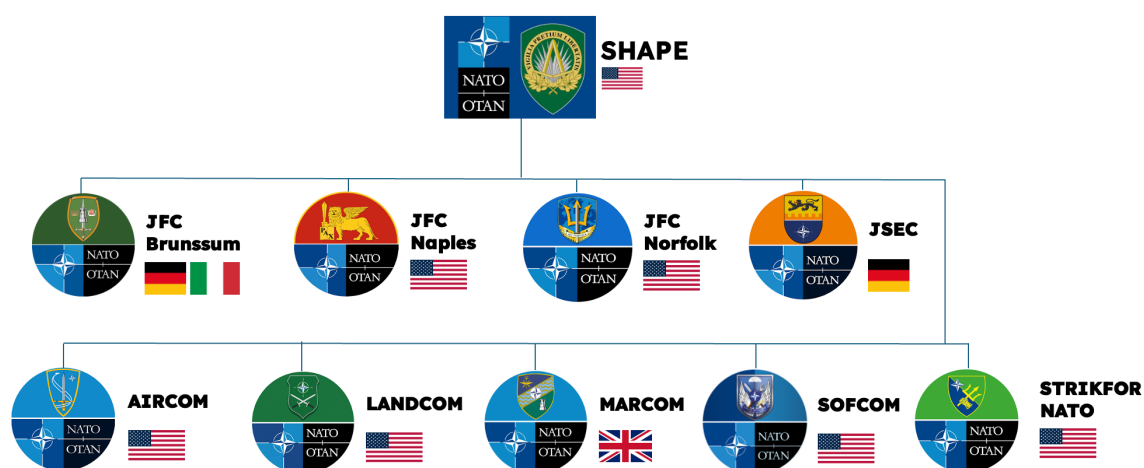
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<sup>12</sup> On NATO's new Regional Plans, see *Op.Cit.* "The History of NATO's Defence Plans"; and Loorents, N. "NATO's Regional Defence Plans", Washington Summit Series No. 5, International Centre for Defence and Security, Tallinn, July 2024. The accession of Finland and Sweden has profoundly altered NATO's northern geography, creating a continuous arc of allied territory from the Arctic to the Baltic and reinforcing the case for a robust and coherent Command and Control architecture in the Nordic-Baltic region. See "Helsinki Ceremony Marks Transfer of Responsibility for Nordic Allies and the Strengthening of NATO's Operational Coherence", Press Release, Headquarters, Allied Joint Force Command, Brunssum, The Netherlands, 5 December 2025.

most notably the North Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the air and land domains – has remained with the United States.

At the same time, the accession of Finland and Sweden creates new opportunities for regional specialisation and for anchoring Command and Control structures closer to the frontlines of deterrence, particularly along NATO's expanded northern and eastern flanks. Strengthening command relationships in these regions would enhance crisis responsiveness and improve connectivity between theatres that are increasingly operationally interdependent.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 1 – The Allied Command Operations Command Structure in 2025**



In parallel with reforms to the NATO Command Structure, framework nations have been adapting the NATO Force Structure to support the Alliance's renewed focus on collective defence. This has involved reorienting headquarters and forces toward high-intensity warfare, most notably by transforming the Rapid Reaction Corps of the post-Cold War expeditionary era into a heavier War-Fighting Corps and by regenerating or developing capabilities that had been reduced or abandoned. These include deep fires, surface-based air defence, combat engineering, transportation, movement control and medical support.<sup>14</sup> To support this transition and mitigate the challenges associated with rebuilding such capabilities, greater emphasis should be placed on close bilateral or multilateral partnerships among army corps, following

<sup>13</sup> *Joint Statement by the Commanders of the NATO Joint Force Commands*, Headquarters, Allied Joint Force Command, Brunssum, The Netherlands, 11 June 2025.

<sup>14</sup> There are currently 10 multinational army corps in the NATO Force Structure: the 1<sup>st</sup> German-Netherlands Corps; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps; the UK-led Allied Rapid Reaction Corps; the Rapid Reaction Corps-France; the four NATO Rapid Deployment Corps led by Greece, Italy, Spain and Turkey; the Multinational Corps, Northeast; and the Multinational Corps, Southeast. In addition, the Eurocorps, which is governed by a special treaty among framework nations, meets NATO force standards and has a specific agreement with the Alliance for its potential employment under SACEUR's operational command.

the model of cooperation between the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps and the NATO Rapid Deployment Corps-Italy.<sup>15</sup> For example, a structured partnership between the Rapid Reaction Corps-France and the NATO Rapid Deployment Corps-Greece would reflect the regular transit of French forces through Greek territory en route to Romania and enhance operational coherence along key reinforcement corridors, while a similar operational partnership between the NATO Rapid Deployment Corps-Spain and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps would be consonant with the geographic proximity of Polish forces and Spanish forces stationed in Slovakia as part of NATO's forward land force deployments.

Of greatest significance for NATO's deterrence posture in peacetime and its effectiveness in war, the three Joint Force Commanders now share responsibility for leading the joint and combined fight under SACEUR's strategic direction.<sup>16</sup> The delivery of air, land, maritime and special operations effects by the domain-specific commands – AIRCOM, LANDCOM, MARCOM, STRIKFORNATO and Allied Special Operations Forces Command – in support of the Joint Force Commands would be directed by SACEUR in accordance with the evolving requirements of the overall allied campaign. Placing the Joint Force Commands at the centre of wartime execution of the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area concept allows SACEUR to focus on strategic direction, escalation management and Alliance-wide coherence, while facilitating the planning and delivery of multi-domain effects at the Joint Force Command's joint operational level. Extending NATO's multi-domain capacity from SACEUR's level down to the three Joint Force Commands would help attain a greater balance between the capabilities and competence of the US and European allies in this critical field and ensure that, here as elsewhere, command is matched by capacity.

The war in Ukraine has reinforced the importance of this command logic. It has demonstrated that command arrangements cannot be improvised during the transition from peace to war and that cooperation among joint and component commands must be pre-established, exercised and resilient in the face of disruption and uncertainty. The conflict has also highlighted that high-intensity operations require far more than combat forces alone. They depend on cyber, space and intelligence support; long-range strike capabilities; and the ability to move and sustain forces at scale – areas in which the United States continues to provide the backbone of NATO's deterrence and defence capacity. Finally, Ukraine has underscored the central importance of robust, interoperable and resilient communications systems to effective command and control across a multinational force.

As a result of the step-by-step improvements to NATO's Command and Control capacity since 2018, SACEUR today commands nine "tier 1" three- and four-star operational headquarters: three regionally oriented Joint Force Commands; an Area-of-Responsibility-wide joint support and enabling command (Allied Joint Support and Enablement Command); and five domain-specific commands – AIRCOM, LANDCOM, MARCOM, STRIKFORNATO and Allied Special Operations Forces Command. This expanded command architecture provides a broad range of competencies and capabilities suited to the demands of modern, multi-domain

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<sup>15</sup> Notably, that close partnership helped deliver in 1 July 2024 NATO's new Allied Reaction Force.

<sup>16</sup> *Op.Cit.* "NATO's Regional Defence Plans".

warfare. The intended balance between the regional, joint focus of the Joint Force Commands and the Area of Responsibility-wide scope of Allied Joint Support and Enablement Command and the domain commands is designed to ensure that regional campaigns and functional effects remain mutually reinforcing.

At the same time, SACEUR's span of command has expanded significantly – from four tier-1 subordinate commanders during the Cold War to nine today – with attendant challenges in terms of synchronisation, coordination and communications interoperability across commands and domains.<sup>17</sup> This expansion raises practical questions about efficiency, responsiveness and the appropriate division of labour between US and European commanders.<sup>18</sup> It also intersects with ongoing debates about rebalancing leadership roles within the NATO Command Structure. While there is growing support for Europeans to assume greater collective operational responsibility, this shift must be matched by strengthened capabilities, enhanced readiness and sustained political cohesion. Absent these conditions, there is a risk either of symbolic rebalancing without genuine operational ownership or of fragmentation of the command chain should US involvement at critical levels diminish.

Looking ahead, there is scope to further strengthen the NATO Command Structure to improve operational effectiveness while achieving a more balanced distribution of command responsibilities between the United States and European allies. Any such rebalancing should reaffirm the established practice of a US flag or general officer serving as SACEUR, dual-hatted as Commander of the US European Command. This linkage remains central to the Alliance's strategic unity and to the credibility of US extended deterrence and reinforcement commitments.

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<sup>17</sup> During the Cold War, SACEUR had four Tier 1 operational-level commands under his immediate authority: three joint, regional commands (AFNORTH; AFCENT; and AFSOUTH) and a single-service functional command (the AFMED maritime command in the 1950s and 1960s and the UKAIR air command in the 1970s and 1980s).

<sup>18</sup> *Op.Cit.* "A New NATO Command Structure".

## Chapter Three

# A Stronger NATO Through Rebalanced Operational Capacity and Command

NATO's command arrangements provide a time-tested framework through which the Alliance can deter and, if necessary, defend against a major adversary, while also responding to growing calls for a more balanced transatlantic division of responsibility. Yet command reform cannot substitute for operational capacity. Any transfer of command responsibilities below SACEUR from American to European flag and general officers must be grounded in the demonstrable ability of European allies, collectively, to generate, integrate and command large-scale, multi-domain forces at high readiness.

The objective of rebalancing is therefore not institutional symmetry, nor the replication of the American way of war through European structures. Rather, it is to ensure that NATO's command architecture remains aligned with how the Alliance is likely to fight, with what forces and enablers and amid growing uncertainty regarding the future scale and character of US conventional involvement in Europe. Two boundary conditions shape this approach. First, the position of SACEUR should continue to be held by a US flag or general officer for the foreseeable future, reflecting the indivisible link between NATO's conventional defence, US extended nuclear deterrence and reinforcement commitments. Second, the pace and scope of any transfer of command responsibilities must be calibrated to the rate at which European allies acquire the capabilities – particularly key enablers – that underpin genuine operational leadership.

Against this backdrop, a phased and capability-driven reform process is proposed over the coming decade. The recommendations below outline a progressive path toward both a strengthened NATO Command and Control system and a more balanced Alliance, with the first three steps implemented before 2030 and a fourth step envisaged beyond that date.<sup>19</sup>

A realistic approach is to distinguish between two levels of ambition. At a minimum, European allies could assume responsibility by 2027 for Joint Force Command Norfolk – relocated to Europe – in addition to Joint Force Command Brunssum and Allied Joint Support and Enablement Command, which are already led by European flag and general officers. At the more ambitious end of the spectrum, Europeans could, beyond 2030, lead all three Joint Force Commands and Allied Joint Support and Enablement Command, and progressively assume selected component commands beneath SACEUR, except Allied Special Operations Forces Command,

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<sup>19</sup> The pace of rebalancing and hand-over of NATO commands from American to European FOGOs would be set concurrently by the speed and scope of the current buildup of European forces, as well as by any decisions by the United States to adapt or reconfigure its military presence in Europe.



STRIKFORNATO and a NATO dual-hatted US 2<sup>nd</sup> Fleet. In both cases, progress would depend on Europeans' ability to generate and integrate the corps-level formations, composite air capabilities and naval forces required to exercise meaningful operational leadership.

### **Step 1: strengthening European operational capacity on a multinational basis**

The prerequisite for any meaningful rebalancing of command responsibilities is a substantial strengthening of European operational capacity on a multinational basis. Without this, European allies may occupy senior positions within NATO's command structure while lacking effective ownership of the forces and enablers required to exercise real operational control. Thus, the proposals in this section rest on the assumption that European allies are prepared to move beyond nationally bounded force structures in favour of deeper multinational integration, including the consolidation of existing national headquarters into standing multinational commands.

In the land domain, European allies should stand up three multinational army-level headquarters – led respectively by France, Germany and Poland – each capable of commanding up to three war-fighting corps. These headquarters would provide the land force backbone for European-led joint operations and serve as credible counterparts to US army-level commands.<sup>20</sup> These army-level headquarters would not be intended to operate simultaneously in all war scenarios. Rather, they could function as a rotational pool of graduated readiness multi-corps land commands, allowing NATO to tailor command arrangements to the geography, scale and tempo of a given contingency.<sup>21</sup> In parallel, the United Kingdom (UK) should continue to strengthen the land component of the Joint Expeditionary Force, providing depth, flexibility and reinforcement capacity for NATO's northern and eastern flanks.

In the air domain, European allies should consolidate their six existing Joint Force Air Component headquarters into three standing Composite Air Strike Forces (CASFs). Each CASF would integrate combat aircraft, electronic warfare, airborne early warning, ISR, air-to-air refuelling and air transport assets, enabling European air forces to generate coherent air packages on a modular basis instead of fragmented national contributions.<sup>22</sup> Any of the CASFs could include, as an optional capacity, a combined French-British nuclear component composed of French Air Force Rafale dual-seat fighters armed with the nuclear ASMP-A air-to-surface missile and flown by mixed French Air Force and Royal Air Force crews and supporting assets (escort fighters, tankers, etc.). Such a combined capacity could constitute a distinct nuclear contribution to the Alliance's extended deterrence posture, as a complement to NATO's extant nuclear-sharing arrangements with the

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<sup>20</sup> Currently, only the US Army Europe (USAREUR) headquarters at Wiesbaden (Germany) has a strengthening capacity to lead high-intensity combined operations involving multiple army corps. The proposed army-level headquarters in France, Germany and Poland would aim for such a level of ambition.

<sup>21</sup> One army-level land headquarters could be available for initial operations within 72 hours, a second within 10 days and the third at 30 days.

<sup>22</sup> A possible model for such a standing European CASF could be the 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force of the US Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) with its array of air command and control, multi-role fighter, suppression of enemy air defences (SEAD), air-to-air refuelling, transport and combat search and rescue (CSAR) assets based in Germany, Italy and the UK.

United States. While the United States would remain indispensable for certain high-end enablers, until European allies step in – particularly advanced ISR and long-range strike – this consolidation would significantly enhance Europe’s ability to plan and execute air operations at scale.

In the maritime domain, European allies should consolidate existing Maritime Force and Carrier Strike Force headquarters into two European Standing Fleets: one in the Atlantic and one in the Mediterranean. Each fleet would integrate surface combatants, submarines and maritime patrol aircraft under multinational command arrangements, thus improving readiness, interoperability and the ability to operate seamlessly alongside US naval forces.<sup>23</sup>

Together, the headquarters of the three recommended army-level commands, three Composite Air Strike Forces and two European Standing Fleets would provide the three Joint Force Commands with a pool of standing component command capacity, which they lost in the 2012 revision of the NATO Command Structure. Their staff would be multinational by design, drawing on personnel from among all European allies, in order to strengthen markedly European force integration and avoid new national structures, enhance interoperability and spread the burden of staffing. These staffs could include personnel from Canada and the United States to maintain and reinforce transatlantic cooperation and share expertise and lessons learned. LANDCOM, AIRCOM and MARCOM could provide oversight, certification and doctrinal coherence across this structured framework of army and corps-level commands, Composite Air Strike Forces and European Standing Fleets, respectively.

Many of the building blocks for this strengthened European operational capacity already exist within the NATO Force Structure and the NATO Force Model, even if they are not yet available at the required scale or readiness. While the development and fielding of new combat and support capabilities can take a decade or more, the organisational measures proposed here – greater multinational consolidation of headquarters and forces – are largely executable in the near term. They would require additional staffing, resources and communications assets, but these challenges should not obscure the opportunity to leverage investments already made through deeper multinational force and command integration.

The end result of this first step would be a combined European conventional capacity of an operational scope and strength such that it would be able to deter aggression by an adversary, execute an effective forward defence of the Alliance – from the High North to the Eastern Mediterranean – and leverage targeted effects delivered by US enablers. The foreseen complementarity between European and US capabilities and operations would mirror the division of tasks and responsibilities

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<sup>23</sup> The eight existing multinational MARFOR/STRIKFOR headquarters headed by France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Turkey and the UK would be affiliated to ESFLant and ESFMed, on the model of the numbered task forces subordinated to the US 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet (TFs 63, 65, etc.). They would be tasked to provide coherent naval task groups and supporting capabilities to the two standing fleets on a rotational basis. MARCOM would assist and help ensure that, between ESFLant and ESFMed and the US 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Fleets, a permanent, but scalable, allied maritime presence is kept in all sea areas (North Atlantic/North and Norwegian Seas; Baltic Sea; Black Sea and Mediterranean Sea). European Allies would build up the capabilities, readiness and capacity of the two ESFs, as coherent formations, to remain at sea and exercise a visible presence on a persistent basis, and, if necessary, fight and prevail.

between the regional-level, European-headed Joint Force Commands, as the supported commanders, and the Area of Responsibility-level, US-led domain-specific commands, as the supporting commanders, recommended in this paper.

## **Step 2: realigning NATO's joint force commands**

The second step focuses on aligning NATO's Joint Force Commands more closely with their regional responsibilities. As NATO's deterrence and defence posture has expanded northward and eastward, the logic of command geography has become increasingly relevant.

In this context, NATO should relocate Joint Force Command Norfolk to Europe, with the UK as the most appropriate host. Such a move would better align the command's physical location with its expanded North Atlantic and High North responsibilities, enhance coordination with national joint headquarters in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden and strengthen integration with the new NATO Combined Air Operations Centre at Reitan. It would also facilitate closer interaction with Joint Force Command Brunssum and USEUCOM in Stuttgart.<sup>24</sup>

As part of this relocation, a European flag or general officer should assume command of the re-sited Joint Force Command. This would represent a tangible but measured step toward greater European operational responsibility, while preserving US strategic leadership at the SACEUR level. At the same time, enduring US naval leadership in the Atlantic should be preserved through the dual-hatting of the US 2<sup>nd</sup> Fleet as a NATO maritime expeditionary command reporting directly to SACEUR, mirroring the US 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet/STRIKFORNATO model in the Mediterranean.<sup>25</sup>

Elevating the commander of Allied Joint Support and Enablement Command to a four-star rank would further strengthen his authority to support and enable forces and infrastructure and SACEUR's ability to deploy forces across his Area of Responsibility.

The combination of three Composite Air Strike Forces and up to four fleets – two American-led and two European-led – would provide NATO with a powerful pool of strategic capabilities across SACEUR's Area of Responsibility. In a conflict, a potential adversary would face the prospect of counter-action along multiple axes and across several domains, creating operational uncertainty and complicating the allocation of scarce assets. This deterrent effect, however, rests on the continued availability of a residual but strategically significant US presence in Europe, centred

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<sup>24</sup> Potential locations for the headquarters of the Joint Force Command relocated to Europe from Norfolk could be the Royal Air Force (RAF) air station at High Wycombe, in the vicinity of London, which between 1994 and 2000 hosted NATO's former AFNORTHWEST regional headquarters, to take advantage of its organic CIS infrastructure or, alternatively, the RAF air station at Lossiemouth, in Scotland, to leverage its growing ISR capacity.

<sup>25</sup> The dual hatting of the US 2<sup>nd</sup> Fleet as a maritime expeditionary command reporting directly to SACEUR would better align the fleet's capabilities with NATO's requirement to exercise and maintain unimpeded sea control in the North Atlantic and the Norwegian Sea than the current dual-hatting of its commander with Joint Force Command Norfolk. The current arrangement is operationally unsatisfactory because it combines the distinct and asymmetric responsibilities of a US fleet commander and a NATO joint commander. Furthermore, the headquarters of Joint Force Command Norfolk are geographically too removed from the Arctic/High North theatre of operations and should be relocated to Europe, as recommended.

on command and control, airpower, extended nuclear deterrence and limited forward land forces.<sup>26</sup>

### **Step 3: European leadership of all Joint Force Commands**

In a third step, European allies would assume command of the Joint Force Command located in Naples, resulting in European allies holding all three Joint Force Commands and taking frontline responsibility for the conduct of conventional defence operations across SACEUR's Area of Responsibility. This handover would need to be carefully sequenced and explicitly conditioned on European progress in capability development, particularly in enabling domains.<sup>27</sup>

As part of this transition, command of the Allied Maritime Command could be transferred from Northwood to the Commander, US Naval Forces Europe, based near Naples, with a European deputy operating from Northwood, in the UK. This arrangement would allow NATO to leverage US naval pre-eminence while improving coordination between European naval forces and the US 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Fleets, without interfering with USNAVEUR's national responsibilities in the wider Mediterranean.

Any such rebalancing would require tailored command arrangements to ensure that US forces allocated to NATO – particularly in the air, maritime, special operations, intelligence and strike domains – can be effectively tasked by European-led Joint Force Commands under SACEUR's direction. This could include US flag and general officers serving in deputy Joint Force Command commander roles with specific responsibility for integrating into the Regional Plans enablers provided by the United States through the domain-specific commands. Such arrangements are essential to preserve strategic continuity between conventional operations and potential nuclear escalation management. Deterrence credibility would be weakened if the perception emerged that the US might be reluctant to execute its NATO extended deterrence commitments in a conflict in which US forces had not participated meaningfully at the conventional level.

### **Step 4 (beyond 2030): European leadership of selected domain commands**

Beyond 2030, and contingent on the maturation of European capabilities, European allies could progressively assume command of selected domain-specific commands, notably LANDCOM, AIRCOM and MARCOM.<sup>28</sup> This step should be conditioned on the full certification of multinational army-level headquarters, Composite Air Strike Forces and European Standing Fleets as mission-capable (see Figure 2). Even at this stage, dedicated arrangements would remain necessary to ensure the effective

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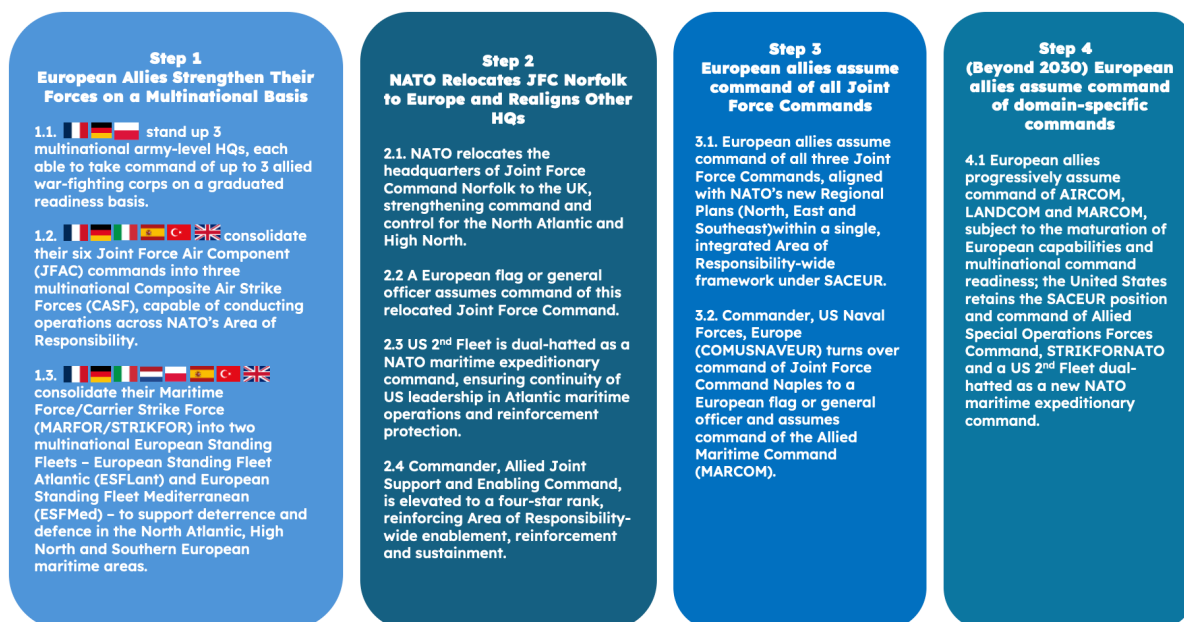
<sup>26</sup> See *Op.Cit.* "What if Hell Breaks Loose?"

<sup>27</sup> This important step would mirror in the NATO Command Structure the measures taken by European allies in Step 1 above to consolidate and streamline their force and command structures.

<sup>28</sup> European leadership of AIRCOM would presuppose a substantial strengthening of European air, missile defence and space-related capabilities, as well as robust arrangements to ensure continued integration of US air and space assets. This could include a US Air Force deputy commander with specific responsibility for the integration of US enablers, and would remain anchored in the dual-hatted SACEUR/USEUCOM relationship. Absent such conditions, a transfer of command responsibility would not be operationally credible.

integration of US capabilities, particularly in the air and nuclear domains.<sup>29</sup> Dual-hatting and US-staffed positions would therefore remain design requirements rather than transitional anomalies.

**Figure 2 - The four steps towards a rebalanced NATO command architecture**



Throughout this process, close cooperation with the United States would be indispensable. Recent experience – including large-scale US/allied land exercises<sup>30</sup>, integrated air operations by composite US/allied bomber, fighter and tanker flights<sup>31</sup> and maritime vigilance activities involving several US/allied aircraft-carriers operating together<sup>32</sup> – provides a strong foundation for a phased transfer of responsibility. Allied Command Transformation could play an enabling role by supporting doctrine development, training and education and the rapid

<sup>29</sup> On exercises involving the rehearsal of the preparation and execution of the NATO nuclear mission by dual-capable aircraft, see Powis de Tenbossche, G. “Decisive North 25: militaires belges et américains se sont entraînés au maniement de bombes nucléaires”, *Air & Cosmos*, No 2942, 23 October 2025: 22-23; Powis de Tenbossche, G. “L’OTAN s’entraîne aux raids aériens nucléaires”, *Air & Cosmos*, No 2943, 30 October 2025: 24-25; and Taghvaei, B. “Exercise Decisive North 25: NATO’s nuclear readiness”, *Air Forces Monthly*, December 2025: 40-43.

<sup>30</sup> Exercise *Avenger Triad* rehearses the ability of allied army corps to conduct combined operations. The first edition in autumn 2024 involved the headquarters of three army corps – the US Army’s V Corps and the Multinational Corps, Northeast and Southeast – operating under the command of Headquarters, US Army, Europe (USAREUR). The 2025 edition involved seven army corps: in addition to V US Corps and Multinational Corps, Northeast, the 1<sup>st</sup> German-Netherlands Corps; 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps; Allied Rapid Reaction Corps; Rapid Reaction Corps-France; and NATO Rapid Deployment Corps-Spain. See: Vandiver, J. “Europe-wide drill led by US Army puts NATO’s new plan into first action”, *Stars & Stripes*, 19 September 2024.

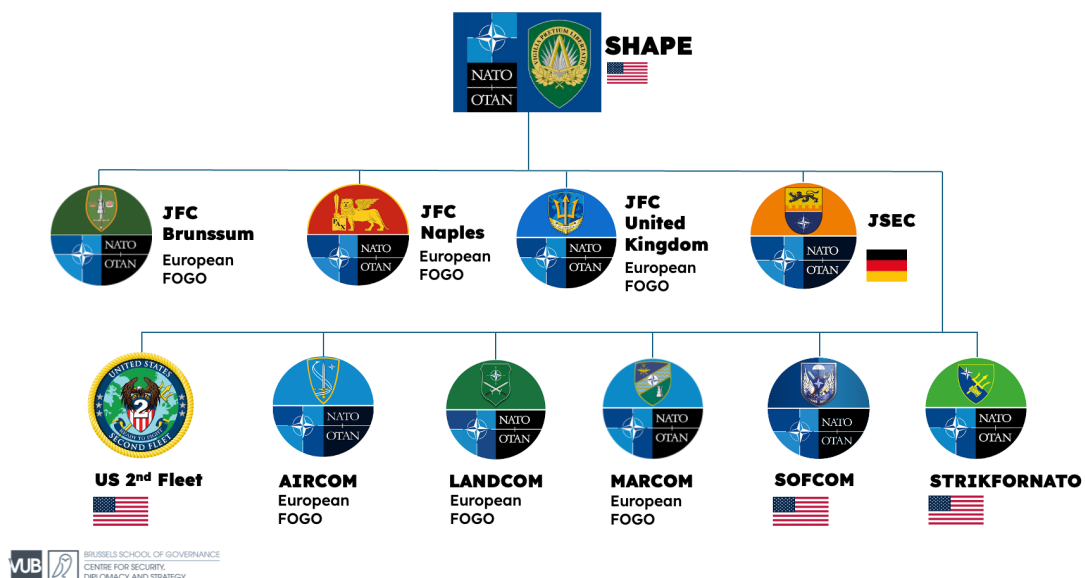
<sup>31</sup> Broadbent, M. “B-52Hs complete latest European bomber task force deployment”, *Key. Aero*, 18 December 2024.

<sup>32</sup> Press Release, *NATO Enhanced Vigilance Activity Neptune Strike 25-3*, Headquarters, Naval Striking and Support Forces, NATO, Oeiras, Portugal, 19 September 2025.

incorporation of operational lessons, including those emerging from Ukraine, to prepare European forces to assume a greater share of the Alliance's collective defence responsibility.

The end result of this four-step process would be a strengthened and more balanced command arrangement, with European allies having assumed a much greater share of responsibility for the defence of the Alliance – both in terms of operational capacity and command authority (see Figure 3). At the same time, the strategic unity of SACEUR's Area of Responsibility and the enduring engagement of the United States in NATO, including reinforcement commitments and extended deterrence, would continue to be embodied in the position of SACEUR.

**Figure 3 – The proposed Allied Command Operations command structure in 2035**



# Conclusion

## Matching Command to Capacity

Russia's war against Ukraine has reinforced a lesson that NATO has repeatedly absorbed – and too often forgotten – since the end of the Cold War: effective deterrence and defence depend not only on the availability of forces, but on the full set of conditions that allow those forces to fight as a coherent whole. These conditions include predictable and resilient command relationships, robust communications and information systems, advance planning and reinforcement arrangements, logistics and sustainment at scale and the ability to integrate operations across all domains under severe time pressure and uncertainty.

The war has also underscored the enduring importance of US strategic enablers and extended nuclear deterrence for NATO's overall defence posture, alongside the urgent need for Europeans to provide much more of the Alliance's conventional mass, depth and staying power. For European allies, becoming credible first responders on their own continent requires more than higher defence spending. It requires the ability to generate, sustain and command multinational forces at scale – and the political willingness to assume the responsibilities that come with that role. This ambition, in turn, would require a political and operational paradigm shift in Europe away from the current “additive” approach that favours the generation of an ever-expanding number of nationally-led headquarters (army corps, JFACC commands and MARFOR/STRIKFOR staffs) towards an “integrative” approach that welcomes the consolidation of national capabilities and commands, and aims at a genuine European-scale operational capacity.

Rebalancing NATO's command arrangements must therefore be understood as a function of how the Alliance intends to fight, rather than as an end in itself. Command structures cannot compensate for missing capabilities, nor can they be allowed to move ahead of operational reality. A premature transfer of command responsibilities risks producing hollow leadership, undermining deterrence and eroding confidence in NATO's ability to act decisively in crisis.

At the same time, deferring any adjustment to NATO's command arrangements until European capabilities are fully mature carries its own risks. It would weaken incentives for multinational force integration, entrench dependence on US leadership at the operational level, and leave the Alliance ill-prepared for plausible contingencies in which US conventional involvement in Europe might be more limited or more selective than today.

The phased, capability-driven approach set out in this In-Depth Paper seeks to navigate between these risks. By anchoring command reform in demonstrable operational capacity, NATO can preserve US strategic leadership while enabling European allies to assume greater responsibility in a manner that is credible,

predictable and stabilising. Crucially, this approach avoids two undesirable outcomes: 1) an “empty-shell SACEUR”, in which the United States retains formal authority without meaningful operational engagement; and 2) a fragmented Alliance, in which regional groupings and *ad hoc* arrangements substitute for an integrated chain of command.

This analysis also highlights that Command and Control is not solely about organisational charts. Effective Command and Control depends equally on mechanisms: communications systems, decision-making processes, training and certification regimes and the ability to absorb and disseminate operational lessons rapidly. In this regard, Allied Command Transformation has a key enabling role to play, particularly in facilitating the rapid adoption of new technologies and concepts of operation, as demonstrated by the ongoing war in Ukraine.

NATO stands at a pivotal moment. The Alliance faces a persistent and capable adversary, an expanded geographic responsibility from the High North to the Black Sea and a shifting transatlantic balance in which European allies are expected to shoulder far greater responsibility for their own defence. How NATO adapts its command arrangements in response will shape not only its military effectiveness, but also its political cohesion and strategic credibility.

Rebalancing NATO’s command arrangements is both necessary and feasible – but only if it is driven by capabilities rather than symbolism. If command reform follows from clear decisions about how the Alliance intends to fight, with what forces and enablers, and under what assumptions about risk and responsibility, NATO’s command arrangements can continue to serve as a force multiplier rather than a constraint – reinforcing deterrence, enabling effective defence and anchoring transatlantic solidarity in an era of renewed strategic competition and high-intensity warfare.



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