Taking Charge

European Forces and the Challenges of Conventional Defence

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Abstract

European allies are embarking on the most significant military buildup in decades, driven by Russia's sustained aggression and growing expectations that Europe assume primary responsibility for the continent's conventional defence. At the same time, the United States is reprioritising its strategic focus toward the Western Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific, raising questions about the future balance of roles within NATO.

While the need for a rebalanced alliance is widely recognised, its operational implications remain insufficiently defined. In particular, NATO's ability to generate, integrate and command forces at scale remains constrained by a combined force structure that has expanded significantly since the end of the Cold War, but often in a fragmented and insufficiently coherent manner.

This CSDS In-Depth Paper examines how European allies can translate increased defence spending into combined operational capacity to sustain high-intensity, multi-domain operations amid reduced US involvement. It argues that the next phase of NATO adaptation must shift from expansion to integration, focusing on the consolidation and optimisation of existing multinational force structures.

To this end, the paper proposes a set of measures to strengthen Europe's combined operational capacity across the land, air and maritime domains. These include the consolidation of higher-level headquarters, closer integration of multinational formations and the establishment of more coherent command relationships capable of generating operational mass at scale.

The paper concludes that assuming "primary responsibility" for Europe's conventional defence is not simply a question of resources, but of organisation. A more integrated and operationally coherent force structure is essential to ensuring that Europe's military buildup translates into credible deterrence and effective defence, while sustaining transatlantic cohesion and US strategic engagement.

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Introduction
The Quest for a Rebalanced Alliance

The transatlantic relationship is at a crossroads. There is a growing recognition that the current balance of responsibilities for Europe's conventional defence between the United States (US) and European allies (and Canada) is unsatisfactory and unsustainable, and requires fundamental change. European allies must step up their military buildup and become more self-reliant collectively, both in their own interest and to sustain continued engagement by the US in Europe's security. The US has communicated unambiguously its expectation that, as part of a rebalanced Alliance – described as "NATO 3.0" – allies would 'assume primary responsibility for the conventional defence of Europe'.[1] Accordingly, they should prepare to assume this "primary responsibility" fully by no later than 2035, with an intermediate step in 2030.[2] Concretely, they should plan for a significantly reduced US conventional contribution, both in forward deployments in Europe – centred principally on Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK) – and transatlantic reinforcement.[3]

This quest for a new division of labour in NATO is driven by three converging factors. First, Russia's continued war of aggression against Ukraine – despite repeated battlefield reversals and massive losses – and its growing belligerence towards Europe make clear that it will remain an acute and persistent threat. This will endure unless its domestic politics fundamentally change.[4] Second, the US is now according its highest priority to the protection of the Western Hemisphere and to ensuring security in the vast Indo-Pacific region, above security requirements and commitments in Europe and elsewhere.[5] This reorientation of national security priorities is reflected in recent US strategic documents[6] and is likely to drive changes in force posture and command arrangements, including to successfully manage the challenge of simultaneous contingencies.[7] Third, European allies' own rearmament effort – the most significant buildup in decades – offers an unprecedented

[1] Remarks by Under Secretary of War, Elbridge Colby, at the NATO Defence Ministerial, US Department of War, 12 February 2026.
[2] These two dates represent reasonable and credible time horizons for European allies (and Canada) to deliver on their expanded defence investments and organise the resulting additional capabilities into a much stronger combined operational capacity.
[3] Simón, L. and Lotje Boswinkel, L. "What if Hell Breaks Loose? Imagining a post-American Europe", CSDS Policy Brief, 17/2025, 11 June 2025.
[4] Ruiz Palmer, D. "Down but Not Out? Russia's Future Military Capacity in the Shadow of Its War on Ukraine", CSDS Policy Brief, 28/2025; Heuser, B. "How Russia Sees War: An Examination", CSDS Policy Brief, 33/2025; and Jones, S.G. and McCabe, R. "Russia's Grinding War in Ukraine", Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2026.
[5] Op.cit., note 1; Dickstein, C. "Army shutters largest command in favor of new 4-star organization for Western Hemisphere", Stars & Stripes, 5 December 2025.
[6] "National Security Strategy of the US of America", the White House, Washington DC, November 2025.
[7] Simón, L. "Deterrence at Scale: Cross-Theater Defense Cooperation in an Age of Precise Mass", Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 10 March 2026.

opportunity to translate that investment into usable, integrated military power. It also creates the conditions to underpin the assumption of "primary responsibility" for Europe's conventional defence. The impetus for rebalancing the Alliance is compelling and should be embraced in the interest of all Allies.

> "The central challenge is not simply to do more. It is to generate an integrated and operationally coherent force at scale

Yet, while the need for rebalancing is widely acknowledged, its operational implications remain insufficiently defined. In particular, the force structure dimension of "primary responsibility" has received insufficient attention. NATO's post-Cold War evolution has produced a dense web of multinational headquarters and formations, but one that often generates dispersion rather than combined operational mass. European forces are today more multinational than ever before, but not necessarily more capable of generating, integrating and commanding forces at scale in high-intensity conflict. The central challenge is not simply to do more. It is to generate an integrated and operationally coherent force at scale.

The initial focus on higher command and control

Against the background of these developments, in early January 2026, we published a CSDS In-Depth Paper entitled "Rebalancing NATO's Command". In that paper, we set out a four-step process for rebalancing the NATO Command Structure (NCS) in the direction of greater European collective responsibility at the operational level. It recommended that European flag and general officers should assume command of NATO's three Joint Force Commands (JFC) before 2030, and of the three domain-centric commands in the air, land and maritime domains by no later than 2035. It also recommended preserving the unique strategic role of the US, vested in the position of Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR),[8] as well as an enduring US military contribution to Europe's defence, even if in selected domains and on a much-reduced scale.[9] Since this publication, NATO has already begun to implement elements of this rebalancing.[10]

[8] SACEUR is concurrently Commander, US European Command (USEUCOM).
[9] Ruiz Palmer, D. and Simón, L. "Rebalancing NATO's Command: European Operational Responsibility and Transatlantic Defence", CSDS In-Depth Paper 22, 12 January 2026.
[10] NATO, "European Allies to take on new leadership roles in NATO's Command Structure", 6 February 2026.

The key concept underpinning this approach was that greater European command responsibility should be matched by greater combined operational capacity. Hence, the paper's broad scope, encompassing command arrangements as well as forces, and the deliberate focus of Step 1 on European force strengthening and integration, rather than perpetuating today's fragmented and dispersed layout. To that end, the paper described how the current set of European high-readiness land, air and maritime headquarters embedded in the NATO Force Structure (NFS) could be brought closer together. In some cases, they could be consolidated under a smaller number of higher-level multinational headquarters.

In particular, the paper recommended standing up three European army-level land commands (4-star) able to take command together of up to nine allied War-Fighting Corps (WFC), three (3-star) European Composite Air Strike Forces (CASF) and two (3-star) European Standing Fleets, one in the North Atlantic (ESFLant) and the other in the Mediterranean (ESFMed).[11] These higher-level headquarters would be better configured than the current NFS arrangements. Their strengthened combined operational capacity would allow them to deter and defend successfully, including under the conditions of a much-reduced US conventional force contribution. They would become the command-and-control (C2) backbone of Europe's enhanced operational capacity. The ambition of "primary responsibility" would thus be matched by a genuine capacity to take charge.

The follow-on focus on force structures

This present In-Depth Paper addresses reform of the NFS and picks up where the preceding paper left off. It examines in greater detail the force structure measures required for European allies to fulfil the ambition of assuming "primary responsibility" collectively for Europe's conventional defence. To this end, European allies would aim at reconfiguring and optimising their forces on a much larger scale than heretofore. Deliberate complementarity, structured compatibility and comprehensive interoperability would be established as mandatory requirements. NATO's institutional machinery would need to be reoriented towards this objective, with capability development, evaluation, certification and standardisation processes adjusted accordingly.

Progressing on this path, however, requires us to refine the concept of European "primary responsibility". To date, this concept has not been defined in operational terms – for example, in relation to NATO's Regional Plans or the scale of forces envisaged under the NATO Force Model.[12] Accordingly, this paper proposes two benchmarks for scoping the requirement and bounding the European buildup process:

[11] Op.cit., Ruiz Palmer and Simón, note 10: 16-17.
[12] Deni, J.R. "The new NATO Force Model: ready for launch?", War Series, 4, NATO Defense College, Rome, May 2024.

1) At the lower end, primary responsibility would consist of a collective European capacity to assume fully NATO's "first responder" mission across SACEUR's Area of Responsibility,[13] matching the readiness and responsiveness currently embedded in US forces in Europe.[14]

2) At the higher end, it would entail the capacity to execute the full range of NATO's Regional Plans with a much reduced – or even absent – US conventional contribution.[15]

These benchmarks are analytical tools designed to help frame the scale of the challenge. They help structure a commitment by European allies to deliver the operational capacity required for assuming "primary responsibility". This is done in the knowledge that the US would gradually cease to play, at the operational level, the role of "grand orchestrator" of allied forces. Importantly, this analysis assumes a sequenced, coordinated and mutually agreed transition in which the US remains engaged at the strategic level, while progressively reducing its conventional operational role in Europe.[16] However, the need for more integrated and operationally effective European force structures would retain its validity even under more disruptive scenarios of US retrenchment.

While the scale of this enterprise will require exceptional constancy of purpose and unity of effort, the starting point is already a high one. European allies have developed over decades a substantial degree of multinational military cooperation through common planning, regular exercises and operations. Multinationality is now well established as the norm for European command and force structures. This legacy – often underestimated – constitutes a key asset in enabling Europeans to act collectively, particularly in a context of reduced US involvement. Together with NATO's current planning frameworks, it provides a strong baseline for further force strengthening and integration.

Against this background, this paper has two main parts. Chapter 1 reviews the trajectory of NATO's force transformation since the end of the Cold War, highlighting both the gains achieved – notably in terms of multinational integration – and the structural limitations that have emerged over time. Chapter 2 then sets out recommendations for force restructuring aimed at enabling European allies to assume "primary responsibility".

[13] NATO's 2018 Readiness Initiative aimed at making 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 naval vessels available within 30 days. Fiorenza, N. "NATO improves force readiness", Janes, 4 December 2019.
[14] USEUCOM maintains "first responder" forces capable of immediate deployment or larger responses, such as US Joint Task Force ***Noble Anvil*** in Kosovo in 1999.
[15] Key enablers include ISR, airborne early warning and strategic airlift. See Mallory, K. et al., "Burdensharing and Its Discontents: Understanding and Optimizing Allied Contributions to the Collective Defense", The RAND Corporation, 7 May 2024.
[16] Marrow, M. "Europe can lead its conventional defense by '2035', EUCOM commander says", Breaking Defense, 12 March 2026.

Chapter One
The Force Transformation Legacy of the Post-Cold War Era

When the Cold War ended, allied air, land and maritime forces had been organised for nearly four decades into large, predominantly national warfighting formations – army corps, air force wings and naval task groups. These were predesignated in peacetime to fulfil NATO's collective defence mission[17] and categorised as either "assigned" or "earmarked"[18], according to their readiness, wartime tasks and geographic positioning. These formations were linked to the NATO integrated military structure through well-established command arrangements and detailed war plans. Reinforcement schemes and operational concepts were rehearsed regularly through major exercises, such as *REFORGER* and *Autumn Forge*.[19]

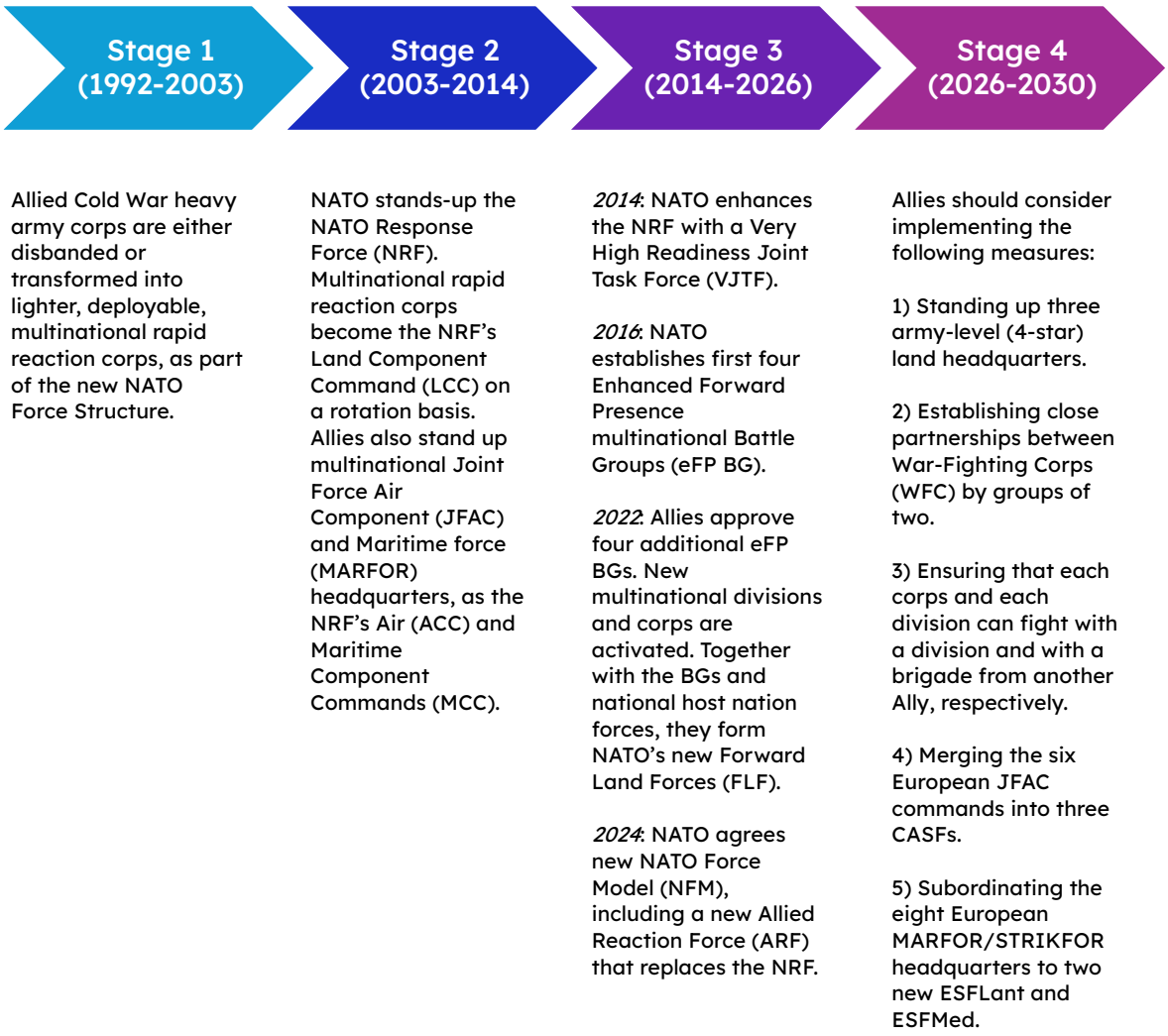
Starting in the early 1990s, NATO's force posture underwent three successive transformation cycles (see Figure 1), reflecting changing strategic priorities and operational requirements. A first cycle, in the 1990s, was characterised by a rapid and substantial downsizing. It also involved a shift away from large, heavy forces designed for large-scale war in Europe towards smaller, lighter and more deployable formations. This included wheeled vehicles and expeditionary configurations.

A second cycle, in the 2000s, saw a reorientation towards joint expeditionary operations beyond NATO territory, informed by the experience of operations in the Western Balkans and Afghanistan.[20] This period also witnessed a growing emphasis on multinationality and jointness, notably through the establishment of the NATO Response Force (NRF), which brought together land, air and maritime component commands on a rotational basis. While often seen as a departure from collective defence, this phase generated a lasting and critical legacy. It enabled the progressive multinational integration of European forces, based on common standards, interoperability and regular joint training. At the same time, subsequent operations revealed the limitations of the lighter force model, particularly in terms of protection and firepower. This led to the introduction of more heavily protected

[17] Allied forces declared to NATO also had national missions.
[18] During the Cold War, "assigned" and "earmarked" forces denoted different readiness levels and transfer-of-authority conditions. "NATO Command Forces" were under SACEUR already in peacetime.
[19] Böhm, W. and Ruiz Palmer, D. REGORGER 87/Certain Strike: The Cold War's Largest Transatlantic Bridge, (Verlag Jochen Vollert, Erlangen, Germany, 2017); and Ruiz Palmer, D. "Military Exercises and Strategic Intent Through the Prism of NATO's Autumn Forge exercise series, 1975-1989", in Heuser, B. and Lasconjarias, G. (ed.) "Military Exercises: Military Messaging and Strategic Impact", NDC Forum Paper, 26, NATO Defense College, Rome, April 2018: 65-92.
[20] Mattelaer, A. Planning, Friction, Strategy: The Politico-Military Dynamics of Crisis Response Operations, (Palgrave, 2013).

land force platforms, such as Mine-Resistance Ambush Protected (MRAP)-like heavily armoured wheeled vehicles.[21]

Figure 1 - The Four Stages of Post-Cold War Restructuring of NATO Forces



Since 2014, allied forces have entered a third transformation cycle, marked by a return to collective defence as NATO's core mission and by efforts to rebuild capabilities for large-scale, high-intensity operations against a near-peer adversary in Europe.[22] For land forces, this trajectory can be summarised as a shift from "heavy" to "light" in the 1990s, to "medium" in the 2000s and back to "heavy" after 2014 – but under fundamentally different conditions than during the Cold War. These

[21] In these operations, air and maritime forces operated largely unopposed.
[22] 2014 also marked the end of the combat phase of NATO's stabilisation mission in Afghanistan.

include a more dispersed and expanded geographical theatre, a greater reliance on multinational force generation and integration and the growing impact of technological change on the conduct of operations. This includes the greater transparency of the battlespace, the growing contribution of space capabilities to mission planning and execution and the expanding interaction between high-end/high-cost and low-end/low-cost platforms and munitions. Crucially, this return to heavier force structures has taken place with fewer forces, greater geographic dispersion and a higher premium on multinational coordination. A similar evolution can be observed in the maritime domain, with a shift from blue-water to littoral operations between 1990 and 2014, and a renewed emphasis on high-end naval warfare since then.[23]

Taken together, these successive transformations have produced a European force structure that is both more multinational and more complex than in the past. While NATO has developed significant strengths in interoperability and combined operations, this evolution has also generated challenges. These include fragmentation, insufficient operational coherence and gaps in the capacity to generate operational mass at scale – issues that form the starting point for the analysis that follows.

The 1990s: Multinational forces as NATO's post-Cold War force design paradigm

Following Germany's reunification, the Allies embarked on a substantial "peace dividend", marked by the rapid downsizing of force structures, reductions in forward presence in West Germany and significant defence spending cuts.[24] This transformation was accompanied by a shift towards new, deployable multinational formations, reflecting both resource constraints and changing operational requirements.

Within this context, NATO developed the NFS concept, distinct from but linked to the NCS, which itself was being downsized from the mid-1990s onwards. The NFS provided a framework through which Allies could transition from Cold War force models to more flexible, deployable configurations. Central to this transition was the concept of "Reaction Forces". These were designed not for large-scale armoured warfare, but for rapid response across NATO's area of responsibility, including crisis management and reassurance tasks.

The first wave of multinational formations within the NFS included the UK-led Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) and the European Corps (Eurocorps) in 1992, followed by the 1st German-Netherlands Corps in 1995 and the Multinational Corps Northeast in 1999.[25] While these formations represented an important step towards

[23] Ruiz Palmer, D. "The End of the Naval Era?: Maritime Power and Engagement in the Early 21st century", NATO Review, spring 2010.
[24] Post-Cold War reductions included major cuts to European and US forces stationed in Germany, undermining claims that NATO enlargement increased military pressure on Russia.
[25] The ARRC, Eurocorps, 1 GE/NL Corps and MNC-NE were derived from Cold War formations. See Young, T-D. "Multinational Land formations and NATO: Reforming Practices and Structures", US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, December 1997.

multinationality, they remained largely isolated "islands" of capability. In contrast to the mechanised corps they replaced, they lacked organic field artillery, air defence artillery, combat engineers and combat aviation units and depended on nationally generated forces for operations. Moreover, linkages between land, air and maritime components were limited, and joint integration remained underdeveloped.

The 2000s: the NATO Response Force and the consolidation of multinationality

In the wake of the initial lessons from operations in Afghanistan, Allies established the NRF in 2002, as the next step in NATO's post-Cold War force transformation. The NRF became operational in 2003 and represented a significant advance over the Reaction Forces of the 1990s. Notably, its design was as a joint, high-readiness force with land, air, maritime and special operations components.

The creation of the NRF spurred a second wave of multinational force development. Several Allies established new high-readiness headquarters across all domains, including additional multinational rapid reaction corps, Joint Force Air Component (JFAC) commands and a Maritime Force (MARFOR) headquarters. This expansion significantly broadened the pool of available multinational command structures at the tactical level.[26]

More importantly, the NRF introduced a rotational component command system that effectively linked previously disconnected force headquarters across Europe. While often associated with NATO's expeditionary phase, this development constitutes a key structural legacy: the emergence of a multinational framework enabling European forces to train, operate and command together on a sustained basis.

The NRF also served as a vehicle for incorporating operational lessons from Afghanistan, particularly in areas such as air-ground integration, special operations forces, communications interoperability, space-enabled capabilities and logistics over extended distances.[27] However, the NRF only partially mitigated persistent capability shortfalls and structural limitations.

More broadly, European forces continued to face significant shortfalls in operational capacity, key enablers and logistical depth, as demonstrated during operations in Kosovo, Libya and Afghanistan. To compensate, Allies increasingly relied on *ad hoc* multinational cooperation, pooling capabilities to generate sufficient mass and sustain operations. This growing reliance on multinational cooperation highlighted both the potential and the limitations of NATO's evolving force structure. While integration was increasing, it remained uneven, dependent on national contributions and insufficient to generate consistent operational mass at scale.

[26] Deni, J.R. "The NATO Rapid Deployment Corps: Alliance Doctrine and Force Structure", Contemporary Security Policy, 25(3) (2004): 73.
[27] Ruiz Palmer, D. "The Enduring Influence of Operations on NATO's Transformation", NATO Review, Winter 2006.

The 2014 pivot back to collective defence in Europe

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014 triggered a third wave of NATO force transformation, this time oriented towards collective defence in Europe rather than expeditionary operations. This phase, still ongoing, has involved a significant expansion of multinational forces along NATO's Eastern Flank.

At the Wales Summit in 2014, Allies agreed to enhance the responsiveness of the NRF, notably by creating the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force. This was followed, in 2016, by the establishment of four multinational Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, and a multinational brigade in Romania.[28] These steps were followed, in 2022, by decisions to establish four additional Battle Groups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania and to scale up all eight Battle Groups to brigade size, where and when required. In 2025, a ninth Battle Group was added in Finland.[29]

At higher levels, this expansion has been accompanied by the activation and strengthening of multinational divisions and corps headquarters, including Multinational Divisions Northeast and Southeast in Poland and Romania, and by the upgrading of existing rapid reaction corps to the War-Fighting Corps (WFC) standard.[30] Compared with the original Rapid Reaction Corps of the 1990s and the NRF Land Component Command corps of the 2000s, the WFC envisages fighting against a peer adversary in a non-permissive, multi-domain environment, with multiple component divisions and a full complement of combat support and combat service support enablers.[31] Together, these developments have significantly broadened the NFS and strengthened its capacity for high-intensity operations (see Figure 2).

However, this expansion has also increased markedly the complexity of the NFS. The multiplication of multinational formations and headquarters at brigade, division and corps levels – often established on an "additive" basis – has generated new challenges in terms of operational coherence, connectivity, interoperability and the efficient use of resources. In effect, NATO has expanded its force structure without a corresponding degree of consolidation, resulting in a more extensive but also more fragmented system – a central tension that underpins our paper's argument.

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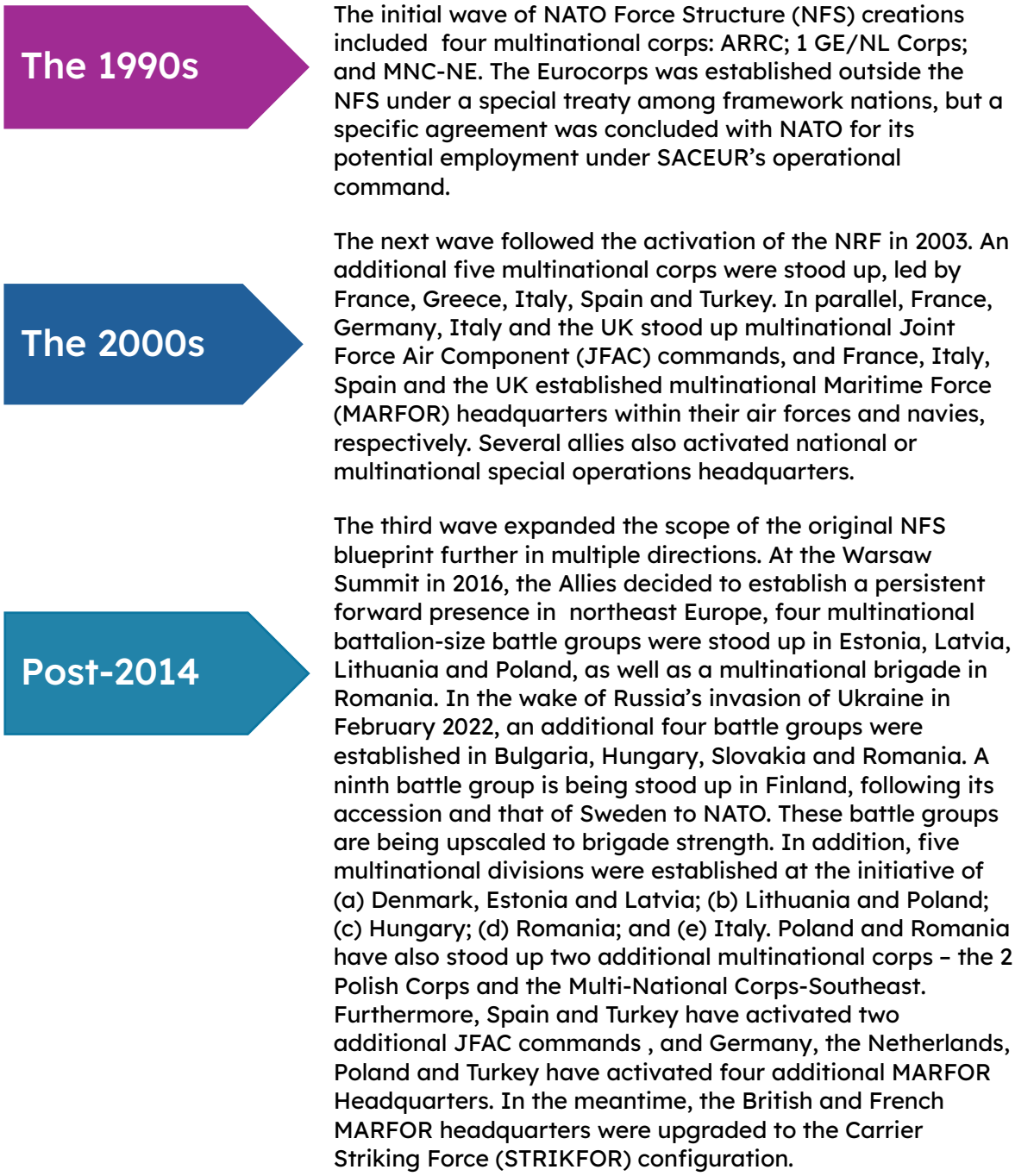
[28] Leuprecht, C. "The Enhanced Forward Presence: Innovation NATO's Deployment Model for Collective Defence", Policy Brief 22-19, NATO Defense College, Rome, 30 October 2019.
[29] NATO "Strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank", Brussels, updated on 23 October 2025. NATO's Forward Land Forces (FLF) now span nine battlegroups from Finland to Bulgaria.
[30] To reflect this transition to the WFC standard, the Rapid Reaction Corps-France at Lille was renamed 1 French Corps on 1 January 2026.
[31] Watling, J. and Mac Farland, S. "The Future of the NATO Corps", Occasional Paper, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), London, January 2021; Marlow, A. and Blythe Jr., W.C. "Multi-Domain Warfighting in NATO: The 1 German-Netherlands Corps View", Military Review, May-June 2022; and Wooddisse, R. "How the 21st Century Corps Fights", RUSI, 27 May 2025.

Figure 2 - The Expanding Scope of the NATO Force Structure



The evolution from eFP to the broader concept of Forward Land Forces aims at mitigating the adverse impact of the additive approach by embedding the various force structures into a more comprehensive forward defence posture.[32] This includes not only multinational formations at brigade, division and corps level, but also national forces deployed along the Eastern Flank and an expanding set of supporting capabilities.[33] These include enhanced situational awareness through sensor networks and uncrewed systems, as well as improved C2 arrangements aimed at strengthening deterrence and responsiveness.[34] Despite these steps, the C2, communications connectivity, interoperability and logistical support challenges associated with multiple, distinct multinational arrangements along the Eastern Flank persist. A better balance should be found between achieving credible deterrence through the visible presence, side-by-side, of the forces of many Allies and the requirement for operationally effective defence in wartime.

This land-centric posture is complemented by parallel developments in the air and maritime domains. NATO's evolving "air shielding" framework integrates national and allied air forces through rotational deployments, air policing missions and joint exercises, supported by enabling capabilities such as air-to-air refuelling and airborne early warning.[35] Maritime forces contribute through persistent vigilance activities, including carrier strike deployments and amphibious exercises. Across all domains, these efforts rely heavily on the multinational headquarters and relationships developed within the NFS over the past three decades.

Taken together, these developments illustrate both the strengths and the limitations of NATO's post-2014 adaptation. The Alliance has significantly enhanced its forward presence and multinational integration. However, this has often taken the form of expansion rather than rationalisation. The result is a force structure that is broader and more capable, but also more complex and insufficiently integrated to consistently generate operational mass at scale.

Against this background, the next chapter examines how European Allies can build on this legacy to achieve a higher degree of combined operational capacity and force effectiveness, notably through the consolidation and integration of existing force structures. The objective is to ensure that future capability improvements – including in areas such as situational awareness, integrated air and missile defence, deep fires and precision strike – are embedded in force structures that can deliver tangible gains in scale, mass and operational effectiveness.

[32] Gustafsson, J. and Hagström Frisell, E. "A New Generation of Forward Defence – NATO in the Baltic States", FOI-R-5765—SE, FOI, Stockholm, June 2025: 31-34.
[33] "Estonia transfers its newly established Division to Multi-National Corps-Northeast", Defence Industry Europe, 28 April 2023; "Lithuania inaugurates new military division, assigns key brigades", LRT (Lithuania), 13 April 2026.
[34] Judson, J. "How the US Army, NATO are creating a new Eastern Flank Deterrence Line", Defense News, 14 October 2025.
[35] Ruiz Palmer, D. "Air Shielding : le bouclier aérien de l'OTAN", Air Fan, 497, février-mars 2025.

Chapter Two
Building Up Europe's Combined Operational Capacity

Since NATO's Wales Summit in 2014, significant progress has been made in strengthening the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture. The US has increased its military presence in Europe, including expanded rotational deployments under Operation *Atlantic Resolve* and the stationing of a corps-sized force in Germany and Poland,[36] while European allies have improved the readiness and capability of their forces. Gaps in critical areas such as fire support, air defence and engineering have begun to be addressed, and improvements in mobility and infrastructure have enhanced responsiveness and sustainability. As a result, NATO today presents a far more credible conventional deterrent than a decade ago. The issue is no longer primarily one of resources, but of organisation – how to translate investment into integrated military power at scale and at high readiness.

However, these improvements remain insufficient when measured against the ambition of European allies assuming "primary responsibility" for the continent's conventional defence. The central challenge is not only to do more, but to do so in a way that generates combined operational capacity at scale and with the full suite of required capabilities: reconnaissance, manoeuvre, deep fires and deep precision strike, electronic warfare/airborne electronic combat, air defence and suppression of enemy air defences, anti-submarine warfare and naval strike. As Chapter 1 has shown, NATO's force structure has expanded significantly, but often through an "additive" logic that has reinforced fragmentation rather than consolidation.

The guiding principle for the next phase must therefore be to move from expansion to integration. The current approach – whereby Allies demonstrate their contribution through nationally-led multinational formations – needs to give way to a more integrated model that federates and optimises existing force structures. This is not a repudiation of earlier efforts, but a necessary evolution towards greater operational coherence and effectiveness that will help European allies feel more self-confident collectively in their combined capacity to assure, deter and defend on their own.

While constraints remain – notably in terms of personnel, readiness and industrial capacity – the overall resource environment has improved significantly compared to the previous decade. European defence spending is rising[37], and new national and multinational initiatives are beginning to address structural shortfalls in recruitment, training and production. The central question is how to organise, integrate and command these growing resources to generate credible warfighting capacity.

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[36] Ruiz Palmer, D. "L'US Army en Europe: le renouveau, 2014-2024", RAIDS Hors-Série, 92, September-November 2024.
[37] Fiott, D. "Return on Investment: Understanding the Rationales for Increased Military Expenditure in Europe", CSDS Policy Brief, 22/2025, 28 August 2025.

Against this backdrop, European allies must pursue a more deliberate and structured approach to force integration across all domains. As outlined in the introduction, this effort is shaped by three structural drivers: the persistent threat posed by Russia and the lessons of the war in Ukraine; the reorientation of US strategic priorities and the resulting expectation of greater European responsibility; and the opportunity created by Europe's ongoing military buildup to rebalance the Alliance.

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> The growing demands on US forces across multiple theatres are likely to constrain the scale, responsiveness and persistence of US contributions to European defence.

The following sections set out concrete proposals to strengthen Europe's combined operational capacity, centred on the consolidation and integration of land, air and maritime force structures. The objective is to enable European allies to generate, integrate and command forces at scale in support of NATO's collective defence mission, and thereby give practical meaning to the ambition of "primary responsibility".

Lessons for Russia and for NATO from Russia's war on Ukraine

The first factor shaping Europe's force requirements is the set of lessons emerging from Russia's war against Ukraine.

1) Russia's geopolitical calculus can be vulnerable to misjudgement and risk-taking. This places an additional burden on Western deterrence.

2) After failing to conquer Ukraine in the first half of 2022, Russia shifted to a strategy of devastation. While this did not break Ukrainian resistance or produce a battlefield victory, it inflicted enormous damage. For NATO allies, devastation is not an acceptable alternative to territorial conquest.

3) Operational acumen cannot compensate for a weak strategy, nor tactical adaptation for operational failure. In Ukraine, Russian shortcomings have

been exposed at all three levels. The conflict has instead underlined how strongly the initial conditions of war shape subsequent outcomes.[38] Technological adaptation has not transformed the character of the war so much as reinforced the importance of scale, resilience and the ability to absorb and regenerate combat power – what is increasingly described as "precise mass".[39]

4) Russia's drift into a long war in Ukraine does not negate its longstanding preference for a short, intense and decisive campaign based on surprise, speed and shock. Against NATO, Russia would still be more likely to seek a rapid territorial *fait accompli*, under the shadow of nuclear coercion, than a prolonged conflict in which the Allies could mobilise superior resources and exploit Russia's geographic and operational vulnerabilities.[40]

5) These lessons point to the need for a resolute forward defence of NATO territory. The aim should be to prevent any *fait accompli* and to win the initial battles of a hypothetical conflict decisively and irreversibly, thereby bringing hostilities to an early and favourable conclusion while limiting destruction on Allied territory. At the same time, NATO force structures must also develop the capacity to sustain prolonged high-intensity operations should the Alliance's initial defence fail rapidly and the conflict become protracted.

A robust forward defence does not imply a return to the tactics and inventories of the 1980s. New technologies and multi-domain operations offer opportunities for more effective ways of fighting. NATO's force design must still reflect Russia's preference for rapid territorial seizure by mobile armoured forces. This means that capabilities able to forcibly contest that operational approach on the ground – including advanced main battle tanks, high-mobility and rapid-fire artillery systems, and uncrewed surveillance and one-way attack drones, within a modern combined-arms team – remain essential. In this regard, Poland's ongoing buildup of modern armour and long-range rocket artillery illustrates the growing importance of achieving a mutually-reinforcing balance between manoeuvre forces and deep fires within Europe's future deterrence and defence posture.

The same applies to deep precision strike (DPS). To be credible, such a capability requires survivable strike systems, robust ISR and targeting support, and the capacity to overcome Russian air defences and reach staging areas and infrastructure targets in order to degrade significantly Russia's ability to generate and move forces and to sustain a long war. During the Cold War, NATO recognised that even a resolute forward defence could not always compensate for unfavourable force ratios in a Soviet breakthrough sector. This insight drove the development of the Follow-On Forces Attack (FOFA) concept and capability,[41]

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[38] Durkalec, J. "Russian Net Assessment and the European Security Balance", Livermore Paper on Global Security, 13, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Livermore, California, March 2024: 34-38.
[39] Horowitz, M.C. "Battles of Precise Mass: Technology is Remaking War – And America Must Adapt", Foreign Affairs (November/December 2024).
[40] Op.cit., Ruiz Palmer, note 3.
[41] FOFA combined land- and air-based strike systems against second-echelon forces. Chain Jr., J.T. "Strategic Bombers in Conventional Warfare", Strategic Review, spring 1988: 23-32.

intended to disrupt second-echelon Soviet forces before they could be committed.[42] Today, a diversified conventional deep precision strike capability using air, land and sea platforms can produce effects well beyond FOFA's original scope.[43] It could also help harmonise fragmented European efforts around a key deterrent capability, provided there is sufficient political resolve.

At the same time, conventional strikes against high-value targets could create escalation risks, especially if Russia conceals the nuclear capability and signature of dual-capable systems attached to, or deployed among, its conventional forces. A stronger NATO deep precision strike capability must therefore remain anchored in a credible combined conventional and nuclear posture. This reinforces the need for a much tighter conventional-nuclear interface and for closer integration of Russian strategic behaviour and lessons from the war in Ukraine into NATO planning.

The US' strategic reorientation and the quest for European self-reliance

The second factor is the reorientation of US strategy towards the Western Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific, and the associated expectation that European allies should assume primary responsibility for Europe's conventional defence. This reorientation should not obscure the fact that, after two decades of retrenchment, US forces in Europe have, since 2022, reached their highest level since the end of the Cold War (see Figure 3). Washington has reinforced Europe not only with additional personnel, but also with high-end warfighting capabilities and enablers, including carrier and amphibious forces, destroyers homeported in Spain, a multi-domain capability in Germany and a rotational bomber task force in the UK. This strengthened forward presence is supported by an expanding reinforcement capacity that has been rehearsed annually since 2020 in the form of the DEFENDER exercise series.

These deployments underscore both the continued centrality of US military power to NATO's deterrence posture and the extent to which European force structures still rely on US enablers and operational depth. Even if not determinative in itself, the growing demands on US forces across multiple theatres are likely to constrain the scale, responsiveness and persistence of US contributions to European defence.[44] The US has already announced the withdrawal from Romania and Germany of elements of, or a full, combined-arms brigade.[45] Furthermore, the DEFENDER exercise series, dating back to 2020, has been replaced in 2026 by the new *Sword*

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[42] Rogers, B.W. "Follow-On Forces Attack: Myths and Realities", NATO Review, December 1984.
[43] Ellison, D. and Sweijs, T. "Shields and Spears: Nuclear-Conventional Force Balancing and the European Deterrence Architecture", The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, January 2026: 24.
[44] Op.cit., Simón, note 8.
[45] At the time of publication of this paper, details of US Army withdrawals from Europe were sketchy. They seem to involve elements of the rotational brigade combat team belonging to the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) deployed in Romania and another rotational brigade combat team belonging to an infantry division deployed in Germany. Both of these rotational deployments were initiated in 2022, following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. In addition, the US Army may not deploy long-range surface-to-surface missiles to strengthen the deep fires capability of its Multi-Domain Command stationed in Germany, as originally envisaged in 2024.

exercise, which seems focused on the employment of US Army forces deployed in Europe, rather than on rapid reinforcement from the US.[46] This is where the third factor – greater European self-reliance within a rebalanced Alliance – becomes decisive.

Figure 3 – The Revival of US Forces in Europe, 2014-2025

Since spring 2022, the US stations approximately 85,000 troops within the USEUCOM Area of Responsibility, either permanently or on a rotational basis, up from 65,000 in 2013 – of which 35,000 belonged to the US Army – prior to Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.

Starting in 2014 and the initiation of Operation *Atlantic Resolve*, the US has strengthened all of USEUCOM's components, with a focus on the US Army in Europe.

1. Corps-level and division-level forward headquarters in Poland;
2. Rotation of an armored brigade combat team and a combat aviation brigade with their equipment to Poland;
3. Rotation of an air assault brigade combat team to Romania;
4. Artillery command and a multi-domain task force in Germany;
5. Strengthening of a field artillery brigade and an air and missile defence command in Germany; and,
6. Prepositioning of equipment for a combined-arms brigade combat team and other formations at storage sites in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland.

In parallel, the US Air Force has reinforced bomber deployments and integrated bomber-fighter-tanker operations with European allies, while also deploying F-35 aircraft to the UK. The US Navy has homeported destroyers in Spain and periodically deploys carrier strike and amphibious ready groups to European waters. The US also maintains missile-defence infrastructure in Poland and Romania and prepositioned Marine Corps equipment in Norway.

From the above, the US contributes several critical, and in some cases, unique capabilities to NATO:

- C2 capability for multi-corps land operations;
- A fully-enabled army corps and multi-domain capability;
- Bombers, escort fighters and tankers;
- Carrier strike and amphibious groups;
- Missile defence;
- Space support (early warning; navigation; communications; etc.); and,
- ISR capabilities and supporting infrastructure.

[46] Vandiver, J. "Army shifts Europe training to executing NATO war plans", Stars & Stripes (European Edition), 28 April 2026.

The path towards European conventional self-reliance

Preparing European forces to take charge of Europe's conventional defence by 2035, with a midpoint in 2030, requires a significant increase in the scale of multinational force integration. This means closing persistent national capability gaps while moving towards managed multinational integration above brigade level for land forces, wing level for air forces and naval task group-level for maritime forces. In practical terms, Europe must move beyond nationally led multinational structures towards a more coherent and hierarchically integrated force design.

Land forces

The bulk of European land power resides in the armies of Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Turkey and the UK, with Poland increasingly standing out due to its rapid expansion in spending, recruitment, force structure and procurement (see Figure 4). The armies of France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK, which share a reinforcement role in support of the forward-located Allies and would have to deploy forces over long distances, can nominally generate around 40 combined-arms brigades of all types. In practice, however, each can deploy only a single division at less than full strength and often with only one or two brigades. Building corps-scale combat power remains a multi-year endeavour requiring personnel, equipment and readiness shortfalls to be addressed from the battalion level upward.[47]

Geography reinforces this challenge. Unlike during the Cold War, when West Germany constituted the central hub of forward defence, today's theatre is broader and more dispersed. The centre of gravity has shifted to an extended Eastern Flank anchored on three interdependent sub-regional hubs – 1) Finland; 2) Poland and the Baltic states; and 3) Romania.[48] Each of these sub-regional hubs presents distinct operational and force-generation requirements, while still requiring theatre-wide integration through NATO's Regional Plans and command arrangements. The combination of geographic dispersion and operational complexity creates a requirement for:

1) Larger, more capable multinational land formations able to fight at scale;

2) Stronger links between divisions and WFCs;

3) Clearer command relationships between WFCs and NATO's JFCs; and,

4) Greater coherence between host, framework and contributing nation arrangements along the Eastern Flank.

[47] Garnier, G. "Le corps d'armée, nouvel étalon de puissance pour les forces terrestres", Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 29 April 2025.
[48] Pesu, M., Särkkä, I. and Linmarimäki, J. "NATO's Extended Frontline: Towards sub-regional strongholds and aggregated deterrence", Briefing Paper, 426, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, December 2025.

Together, these steps would support more dependable command and control, force movement and logistics. Territorial defence, reserve and home defence forces would also play an important supporting role in resilience, rear-area security, infrastructure protection and sustainment.

Figure 4 – Comparative Structures of the Armies of the Larger European Armies

Nation	Brigades	Divisions	Corps HQ Affiliation	Recommendations
	2 armoured brigades 2 light armoured brigades 1 airborne brigade 1 mountain infantry brigade 1 combat aviation brigade	2 division HQ	• 1 FR Corps • Eurocorps	1) Create a third division HQ. 2) Establish a third light armoured brigade. 3) Affiliate Belgian brigade to French Division HQ. 4) Transform French-German Brigade into armoured brigade.
	3 armoured brigades 3 mechanised brigades 1 airborne brigade 1 mountain infantry brigade	3 division HQ	• 1 GE/NL Corps • MNC Northeast • Eurocorps	1) Create a fourth division HQ. 2) Establish two motorised infantry brigades. 3) Affiliate the Czech brigade to German division HQ. 4) Transform French-German brigade into armoured brigade.
	1 armoured brigade 5 mechanised brigades 1 armoured cavalry brigade 1 airborne brigade 2 mountain infantry brigades 1 airmobile brigade	2 division HQ	• NRDC-Italy • ARRC	1) Disband one of the mechanised brigades and strengthen the armoured cavalry brigade.

Nation	Brigades	Divisions	Corps HQ Affiliation	Recommendations
	3 armoured brigades 3 armoured cavalry brigades 10 mechanised brigades 4 motorised brigades 1 “Rifles” infantry brigade 1 airborne brigade 1 air cavalry brigade	6 division HQ	• 2 PL Corps, • MNC Northeast • Eurocorps	
	1 infantry brigade 5 mechanised brigades 1 airborne brigade	2 division HQ	• NRDC-Spain • Eurocorps	1) Disband one understrength mechanised brigade and strengthen the remaining four brigades.
	2 armoured infantry brigades 1 light mech infantry brigade 2 light infantry brigades 1 reconnaissance brigade 1 air assault brigade 1 amphibious brigade (navy)	2 division HQ	• ARRC • NRDC-Italy • JEF	1) Convert light mechanised infantry brigade into a fully mechanised brigade.

At the same time, strengthening the existing eleven combined-arms divisions and five WFCs led by France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK strictly on a national basis is beyond reach.[49] The more promising route lies in structured multinational force integration. Accordingly, the larger European allies should pursue a four-part approach:

[49] European land forces include 11 divisions and 5 War-Fighting Corps across major allies, though with varying levels of mechanisation and readiness. Several European allies are committed concurrently to several multinational formations, such as Germany to the 1st German-Netherlands Corps, the Multinational Corps-Northeast and the Eurocorps; Poland to the 2nd Polish Corps, the Multinational Corps-Northeast and the Eurocorps; and the UK to the ARRC, the NRDC-Italy and the JEF.

1) At the brigade level, understrength combined-arms brigades should be reinforced by adding a third or fourth manoeuvre battalion where missing. Where necessary, this may require disbanding particularly understrength brigades and redistributing their battalions.

2) At the divisional level, closer bilateral cooperation should be used to fill force-structure gaps. Dutch integration into German divisions, Czech affiliation with German formations and new German motorised infantry brigades could allow Germany to stand up a new motorised division optimised for northeastern Europe. Likewise, the French-German Brigade could be upgraded to a fully armoured brigade, Belgium's motorised infantry brigade should be more closely affiliated with a French division[50] and France could stand up an additional light armoured brigade, all contributing to the aim of establishing an additional French combined-arms division.[51] Stronger German-Polish cooperation in land and air planning would also be highly desirable, given Poland's growing military weight, Germany's permanent land presence in Lithuania and the centrality of the Polish-Baltic theatre. The UK could also strengthen its contributions to the ARRC and the land component of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) by increasing the manpower and combat power of its 1st and 3rd Divisions.

3) At the corps level, pairs of European allies should build stronger partnerships between sister corps formations, with the framework nation generating two divisions and the contributing nation the third. The ARRC/NATO Rapid Deployable Corps (NRDC)-Italy partnership offers a useful template, allowing divisions and brigades to be cross-attached and specialised capabilities shared . Closer partnerships would create opportunities for mutual support, for example, the pooling and sharing of high-end enablers and logistical supplies.

4) At the army level, European allies should stand up three multinational four-star land headquarters – led by France, Germany and Poland – each capable of commanding up to three WFCs for combined land operations in northeast (Baltic) and southeast Europe.[52] This could be delivered through forward command posts in Poland and Romania, and rotational and graduated readiness arrangements between the three framework nations. These commands would provide the NATO JFC level with a genuine land component capacity and reduce dependence on US Army Europe's multi-corps C2 capacity. The army level is also the proper level to plan and integrate multi-domain effects and support for combined land operations. Accordingly, these headquarters would facilitate the development of a European multinational ground-based DPS capability centred on long-range

[50] Verstraete, W. "Message from the Eastern flank: From Celtic Uprise to Dacian Fall", Egmont Policy Brief 366, Royal Institute for International Relations, November 2024.
[51] Ruiz Palmer, D. "Mutations stratégiques en Europe: Conséquences opérationnelles pour les armées françaises", DSI, No. 177, May-June 2025, p. 89.
[52] These three European multi-corps land commands would be in addition to that already being stood up by Finland at Mikkeli for combined land operations with Norway and Sweden in the High North.

surface-to-surface missiles, and possibly drones, and associated intelligence, targeting, cyber and electronic warfare capabilities.

The combination of these four levels provides multiple opportunities for larger and smaller European allies to optimise their land force structures and contributions, through expanded multinational integration, in ways that leverage the distinct strengths of each.

Air forces

As shown in Chapter 1, Europe currently has six standing JFAC headquarters, each led by a framework nation and staffed by a small multinational team certified by Allied Air Command (AIRCOM). While useful for sustaining the NRF, they are not designed to command large-scale, high-intensity and sustained air operations in a contested environment.[53]

European allies should consolidate these six JFAC headquarters into three standing CASFs. Each CASF would comprise a composite air pool including multi-role fighters, airborne early warning, ISR, electronic combat, suppression of enemy air defences, air-to-air refuelling and transport aircraft. Modular air packages could then be generated according to the Regional Plan requirements.

Each CASF would draw on a scalable pool of roughly 250-300 aircraft contributed by larger and smaller European allies. The three CASF headquarters would be led by current JFAC framework nations in rotating pairs, with AIRCOM supporting the transition and ensuring connectivity with NATO's Combined Air Operations Centres (CAOC) and Deployable Air Command and Control Centre (DACCC).

This construct would bring several benefits: it would align European air forces with high-intensity warfare requirements; leverage expanded fourth- and fifth-generation fleets, AEW, tankers and transport aircraft; improve Agile Combat Employment; accommodate NATO nuclear-sharing arrangements; and provide the basis for a multilateral airborne deep precision strike capability. Overall, the CASF model would increase Europe's collective airpower capacity while reducing excessive dependence on the US Air Force.

Maritime forces

The current set of eight MARFOR/STRIKFOR headquarters that emerged from NATO's expeditionary era remains optimised for rotational maritime tasking at the lower end of the naval warfare spectrum. This excessively fragmented model is poorly suited to territorial defence in Europe, including persistent sea control, anti-submarine warfare against Russian cruise-missile submarines and combined multi-carrier and amphibious operations.[54] The maritime domain thus remains the least

[53] COMAO is NATO's construct to plan and conduct complex combined air operations.
[54] The primary maritime threat concerns European ports supporting reinforcement, rather than transatlantic sea lines. Wills, S. "'These aren't the SLOC's you are looking for': mirror-imaging battles of the Atlantic won't solve current Atlantic security needs", Defense & Security Analysis, 36(1) (2020): 30-41.

optimised for deterrence within Europe's current multinational force posture. The current MARFOR/STRIKFOR design is also poorly suited to delivering a combined European maritime capacity to help secure Europe's contested periphery.

Over the last decade, European navies have sought to become more capable for high-end operations, notably through the procurement of larger carriers, more capable attack submarines and anti-submarine warfare surface ships and new maritime patrol aircraft. Since 2023, NATO's *Neptune Strike* activities have reinforced this shift by associating European naval aviation and amphibious capabilities with the US 6th Fleet in increasingly ambitious combined maritime operations.[55] France and the UK have already adapted their MARFOR headquarters to the more capable STRIKFOR model.

Yet, despite this progress and possessing together 10 "capital ships" (aircraft- and helicopter-carriers and large amphibious ships), European allies still cannot collectively generate on short notice a high-end naval force able to remain at sea for prolonged periods, deter effectively, and, if necessary, contain a conventional war with Russia from the maritime domain.

To address this shortfall, the eight MARFOR/STRIKFOR headquarters should be affiliated to two new European Standing Fleets: one for the North Atlantic, Baltic, North and Norwegian Seas; and one for the Mediterranean and Black Seas.[56] The current headquarters would be resized and repurposed as subordinate force-generation headquarters, while ESFLant and ESFMed would become their superior commands. This would allow Europe to move from rotational maritime formations towards standing fleets with full-spectrum capabilities and a capacity for persistent presence in European waters. In parallel, STRIKFORNATO should retain the role of exercising, certifying and, if required, commanding multi-carrier and larger amphibious operations beyond the scale available within the two European standing fleets.

Special Operations Forces

SOFs have acquired a more established role in European force structures through the creation of national joint SOF commands and the periodic activation of multinational SOF formations with support from the NATO Command Structure Allied Special Operations Forces Command (SOFCOM).[57] Smaller allies have also developed combined SOF capabilities cooperatively.[58] The principal shortfall remains air mobility, especially fixed- and rotary-wing transport able to deploy SOF rapidly and at scale.

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[55] Large-scale NATO maritime exercises peaked during the late Cold War. Ruiz Palmer, D. "NATO's Cold War Maritime Transformations: Insights for a new era from the Concept of Maritime Operations", in Bruns, S. and Jentzch, C. (eds.) Guardians of the North Atlantic (NOMOS, Baden-Baden, 2025).
[56] ESFMed deployments into the Black Sea would comply with the 1936 Montreux Convention and NATO guidance.
[57] Gompert, D.C. and Smith, R.C. "Creating a NATO Special Operations Force", Defense Horizons, 52, National Defense University, Fort Lesley McNair, Washington DC, March 2006.
[58] Fiorenza, N. "Belgo-Danish-Dutch Composite Special Operations Component Command reaches FOC", Janes, 9 December 2020.

Space support and cyber defence

Space and cyber capacities are becoming increasingly central to military effectiveness, but the scope for multinational integration is more limited because of their sovereign character. Even so, both domains are evolving rapidly. Dynamic satellite constellations, reusable launch vehicles and wider battlefield applications are transforming the field. In cyber, proliferating actors, tools and AI-enabled methods are reshaping threats and responses. These trends will increasingly affect how the multinational force structures proposed in this paper plan, train and fight, even if space and cyber do not lend themselves to the same degree of consolidation.

Training and exercising

A higher degree of multinational force integration will require a corresponding increase in ambition in training and exercises. European allies should progressively align national and multinational live exercises to rehearse the deployment and employment of the larger formations proposed in this paper in a continental-scale setting, including airspace management, movement control and host-nation support. In the air domain, the transition from JFACs to CASFs should be matched by closer alignment of existing exercises and, where appropriate, their integration into larger CASF-scale exercises inspired by AIRCOM's *Ramstein Flag* model.

NATO support for the strengthening of European forces

In the force design proposed here, Allied Land Command (LANDCOM), AIRCOM and Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) would help ensure that the three army-level headquarters, the 11 War-Fighting Corps, the three CASFs and the two European Standing Fleets, together with their affiliated formations and units, remain ready and capable of carrying out their collective defence missions under the Regional Plans. Their roles would include advice, doctrine development, exercise support, evaluation and certification.

The NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) should also be adjusted to support the transition from the current NATO Force Model towards the more integrated multinational construct proposed here.[59] In particular, greater weight should be given to the objective of integrating European forces into capable multinational formations. This would require the NDPP to assess not only national contributions, but also the combined force structures they support.

For the next NDPP cycle, political guidance could also task the NATO Military Authorities to use the two benchmarks proposed in this paper to test whether current force development trajectories are consistent with the goal of European "primary responsibility":

1) The first benchmark concerns "first responder" capacity: whether the Allied Reaction Force (ARF), the rapidly scalable Forward Land Forces and

[59] Lapsley, A. and Vandier, P. "Why NATO's Defense Planning Process will transform the Alliance", Atlantic Council, 31 March 2025.

supporting capabilities would be sufficient to deter, counter and defeat a limited short-warning Russian *coup de main*, including in the absence of a US contribution.

2) The second benchmark concerns wider operational capacity: whether European forces could execute NATO's Regional Plans under three variants – a scaled-back US forward contribution, no forward US contribution but a standing reinforcement commitment from the continental US, or no conventional US contribution at all.[60]

These questions inevitably raise the conventional-nuclear interface and the continued credibility of US extended deterrence in a context where European allies bear primary responsibility for conventional defence. They also underscore the extent to which the future credibility of NATO's deterrence posture will depend on whether Europe can convert rising military effort into coherent, integrated and operationally effective force structures.

As this paper has argued, there is no realistic path back. Since the 1990s, the pursuit of multinationality has gradually evolved from an instrument of post-Cold War adaptation into the foundation for a much larger shift in transatlantic burden-sharing. Under the combined pressure of the war in Ukraine, changing US priorities and Europe's own rearmament, the continent's conventional security will increasingly rest in European hands. The task now is to ensure that Europe has the force structures needed to bear that responsibility effectively.

[60] The quest for refining the concept of "primary responsibility" might usefully take account of a study effort led by the NATO Military Authorities between 1981 and 1983 that assessed the potential adverse impact on NATO's rapid reinforcement from North America in a hypothetical contingency situation where US reinforcements earmarked for NATO would have been diverted to the Middle East.

Conclusion
Aligning European Forces to a Higher Ambition

European forces have been moving for over a decade towards greater combined operational capacity, but without reforming command and force structures to the degree necessary to fully leverage that effort. Enhanced capabilities – whether in ISR, deep precision strike or air and missile defence – remain of limited value unless they are embedded in warfighting formations and command arrangements configured to employ them effectively. Too often, capability enhancements are assessed in isolation from the operational environment in which they would have to be employed and from the force structures needed to translate nominal capacity into combat effect. Western assessments of Russian military power before February 2022 often fell into precisely that trap. This In-Depth Paper has sought to avoid it by reconnecting capabilities to force structure and operational design.

As the analysis has shown, the basic building blocks needed for European allies to take charge of the continent's conventional defence are already in place. What is missing is scale, consolidation and operational coherence – without which increased capability cannot translate into combat effectiveness. Europe's existing command and force structures remain too fragmented to generate the level of combined capacity required for credible deterrence and effective defence. The ongoing buildup of capabilities across the land, air and maritime domains must therefore be matched by a resolute effort to strengthen and integrate the structures that would employ them. In that respect, the three army-level land commands, three CASFs and two European Standing Fleets proposed in this paper would provide the backbone of a more capable and more coherent European force posture.

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European forces have been moving for over a decade towards greater combined operational capacity, but without reforming command and force structures to the degree necessary to fully leverage that effort

In practical terms, European allies are already well into the transition but risk falling short of their stated ambition if they fail to move from buildup to restructuring. The February 2026 NATO decision to transfer command of the Allied JFCs in Naples and Norfolk from American to European flag and general officers gives this effort a concrete operational horizon before 2030. It creates both an opportunity and an obligation for Europeans to prepare themselves not only to command more, but also to field the force structures required to make that command meaningful. By 2035, it is reasonable to envisage European allies assuming a much greater share of responsibility not only for NATO's regional defence, but also for the NATO domain-centric land, air and maritime commands that underpin it.

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If approached seriously, the timelines of 2030 and 2035 can serve as useful milestones for aligning political ambition, operational planning and force development. A militarily rebalanced Alliance by 2035 is no longer a distant abstraction, but an increasingly realistic prospect

The two benchmarks proposed in this paper – a European "first responder" capacity and a wider capacity to execute NATO's Regional Plans with only a very limited US conventional contribution – offer an initial framework for scoping that ambition. They are not endpoints so much as tools for measuring progress and disciplining the debate on what "primary responsibility" should mean in practice. If approached seriously, the timelines of 2030 and 2035 can serve as useful milestones for aligning political ambition, operational planning and force development. A militarily rebalanced Alliance by 2035 is no longer a distant abstraction, but an increasingly realistic prospect. The task now is to commit collectively to that path – and to use NATO's Ankara Summit in July 2026 to signal that Europe is prepared to match ambition with structure, responsibility with capacity and capabilities with force design.

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