

BRIEF

A EUROPEAN WAY OF WAR

EUROPEANISING NATO NO. 10

| ARMIDA VAN RIJ |

The threat from Russia is increasing while the US is demanding that Europeans take on the bulk of the continent's conventional defence. NATO's European Allies (and Canada) must be able to defend Europe with minimal US reinforcement. In this context, developing a European way of war is essential.

NATO's regional plans are premised on European forces acting as a tripwire to hold adversaries until US reinforcements arrive. Yet, in the current circumstances, it is difficult to be certain that the full scale of US reinforcements included in the plans will be available. European NATO must be able to deter in the first instance and, if necessary, defend its territory alone. The European Allies will, at least in the short term, be less interoperable and less integrated than desired to take on this challenge. They will also find it difficult to fight according to existing NATO doctrine, which is largely built around the DNA of American military practice. To make up for these operational shortfalls, NATO will need to rapidly transition from peace to wartime following a large-scale attack.

This brief concerns a Europeanised NATO. Rather than proposing an independent European way of war, it assumes that the US will continue to be part of the Alliance but will take a smaller role conventionally. It also assumes the US will not act to block the rest of NATO. The central question, then, is how to develop a European way of war that is still compatible with NATO's existing doctrine but can be scaled rapidly should the US be unwilling or unable to fully participate militarily in the event of war as currently envisioned.

It is not concerned with a 'fight tonight' scenario, but a near-term one, i.e., the next 1–3 years. Over this timeframe, Russia might accelerate its hybrid war on NATO as the war in Ukraine grinds on. But in a post-ceasefire scenario, it will rapidly reconstitute its forces and need a target to direct its war machine at—most likely Europe. European intelligence agencies and military chiefs have assessed that Russia will be ready to attack a NATO country by 2030—or even sooner.¹ In the first scenario, the most likely case would be a limited—though nonetheless serious—action, as the majority of Russian forces would still be concentrated in Ukraine, giving NATO time to respond. But the second case would be a full-scale military action, requiring rapid mobilisation in response.

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A THEORY OF WAR FOR
EUROPEAN NATO

NATO doctrine is largely based on US manoeuvre warfare. With less active US involvement, European NATO will face operational constraints as it has neither escalation dominance nor the critical enablers required for high-end manoeuvre warfare. In these circumstances, a European way of war will be based on a combination of positional and attritional warfare: holding the front line as far as possible for as long as possible, while targeting Russia's ability to continue to wage war.²

Aside from operational constraints, aspects of manoeuvre warfare will also not be politically acceptable to populations in eastern flank countries. The war crimes Russia committed while fighting over Ukrainian cities like Bucha changed the thinking in European frontline states. Political leaders here have strengthened their objections to ceding territory, which may otherwise have been required as part of manoeuvre doctrine.

A key challenge comes from the fact that Russia's current line of attack on Europe is based on deniability—although this is rapidly changing.³ For now, it mostly uses covert tactics and low-level agents to conduct grey-zone warfare and create political divisions among NATO Allies. It is possible that a large-scale attack, whether massed conventional or grey-zone, will meet the Article 5 threshold in (some) Allies' eyes, but Russia will seek to exploit and expose Europe's political disunity about whether and how to respond. Russia's assumption will be that the risk-averse countries will win the argument—making it entirely possible that Russia will escalate not to win territory, but to prove that Europe is not united. The most dangerous moment for Europe will thus be the period of consultation between an attack and the decision to move to a war footing. Slow decision-making by Europeans will cede the advantage to Russia.

The lack of political cohesion among European NATO countries is then perhaps their weakest link. Success in implementing the European way of war and overcoming operational challenges due to US disengagement requires Allies to rapidly transition from peacetime to war as one, with all the political, military and legal implications. In turn, strong support from publics to defend European territory will be a crucial element of fast decision-making. Countries whose publics do not understand the threat are less likely to have the appetite to move to a war footing as quickly as may be required.

WHAT TO EXPECT OF THE US

Although the US may not provide many conventional capabilities for Europe's defence, there are signs that it will not withdraw or withhold access to some critical enablers like space-based intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance. To date, US

withdrawals from the NATO force model have—with a few exceptions—focused on combat capabilities rather than enablers.⁴ But European NATO should take steps in the short term to secure replacements for those strategic enablers which the US will no longer make available to NATO, especially strategic lift and air-to-air refuelling.⁵

In the current context, this is a 'good' scenario for Europe. Alternatives in which the US withdraws enablers or otherwise seeks to block action by European NATO are also possible.⁶ But given the (rising) cost of military capabilities, European NATO faces what amounts to a binary choice between spending funds to close conventional capability gaps and improve deterrence, or replacing all US strategic enablers. Ideally, it will do both over a longer time horizon, but it cannot do so in the short term.

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OPERATIONALISATION

It will be difficult to quickly overcome the challenge of political unity. While it may be absent initially, there are other options to engineer fast responses. The first is to use the growing engines of leadership within the Alliance, whether from the Nordic countries or the E4, to drive forward decision-making.

A second is building acceptability among the Allies that the JEF could be a first responder, to be followed by NATO action. Responses to major grey-zone attacks that result in mass casualties or large-scale cyber-attacks must be fast and decisive. Where there may be a lack of consensus around the table in the NAC in the short term, the JEF, through its 1+1 mechanism, has the agility and flexibility to respond quickly and effectively, giving NATO a chance to build consensus in the meantime.⁷

A rapid transition from peace to wartime will also involve establishing a regulatory environment that would enable positional and attritional warfare and can be activated if war breaks out. One aspect is facilitating fast military

movement across the continent and over the sea. Passing the EU regulation on Military Mobility by the end of 2026, as expected, will be a positive step in the right direction.⁸ Another involves introducing quick and flexible procurement mechanisms that can be activated in wartime to get needed equipment to the battlefield, and providing large, long-term contracts to sustain industrial capacity.

European NATO will also need to generate warfighting mass differently. Mass is expensive for advanced economies with high-end militaries, but Russia's war in Ukraine has shown that it is necessary to deny an adversary territorial wins.⁹ Part of the answer lies in low-cost, expendable, uncrewed and/or autonomous systems. NATO Allies' procurement has traditionally focused on small numbers of exquisite systems, rather than the many low-cost effectors used in Ukraine. European NATO will need to shift to a broader spectrum and a more balanced mix of high-end and low-end capabilities which can be quickly reconstituted.¹⁰

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Low-cost autonomous or uncrewed systems can be used to hold the frontline and overwhelm enemy air defence systems in conjunction with high-end stealth medium- to long-range missiles to degrade an adversary's ability to wage war.¹¹ Ideally, these would be produced indigenously to allow innovation timelines to be compressed, and capabilities to be deployed rapidly after production. Various European production initiatives are already underway, but the core challenge will be to scale up production such that the defence industrial base becomes an asset in an attritional war. Production of European cruise missiles, for example, is currently lagging, and there is little indication that Europeans want to develop ballistic missiles.¹²

On land, fast response can be ensured through formations in place on the eastern flank, such as the nine enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups and the Estonian Division, which

can be reshaped as needed to provide defence. Deploying additional troops to the eastern flank will be politically sensitive, as Allies will be concerned with the need to balance defence with fear of escalation. Regional defence arrangements in the Baltic and northern regions will be as important as national defence, with strong coordination and cooperation mechanisms between Joint Force Command Norfolk, responsible for the northwest, including the Arctic, and Joint Force Command Brunssum, which is responsible for the Baltics and central Europe. Within the Joint Operations Area-Centre, ensuring coordination between 1 (German-Netherlands) Corps, responsible for Estonia and Latvia, and the Polish-led Multinational Corps Northeast, which looks after Latvia, will be crucial to prevent operational gaps across the seams of these commands which Russia could exploit.

In terms of air defence, prepositioned stockpiles of ammunition are essential to ensure Allies will not simply run out in the first few weeks of a kinetic conflict. Protection and hardening of ammunition depots will also be a priority as they will become primary targets. Defending infrastructure will be complicated by an occasionally patchy situational awareness picture, for which US capabilities are currently vital.

Meanwhile, maintaining and defending sea lines of communication to the Baltic states and northern Europe will be essential and should be a priority for the Baltic Sea's littoral states. This is needed to ease pressure on limited land routes to the Baltics, and to ensure that Finland, which receives supplies primarily by sea, remains connected to the European mainland. Germany and Poland in particular are well placed to neutralise any threat originating from Kaliningrad and keep the Suwałki gap open. More broadly, logistics is another challenge for the European Allies, as the outsourcing of much of their military logistics to the private sector may make it harder to generate logistical mass.¹³ European NATO will also need to rapidly build hardened facilities, secure fuel, food and water supplies, and ensure sufficient capacity in hospitals.

Finally, Ukraine must become a cornerstone of European defence. It will have Europe's most experienced and battle-hardened armed forces, and extensive arms production to draw upon. Ukraine will be able to generate capabilities for Europe's defence more cheaply and reproduce effects currently provided by the US (for example, using the Flamingo missile instead of more expensive US Tomahawks for which production timelines are lagging).

A key challenge today is to work out how to use Ukraine's military innovation and rapid adaptation expertise in a European NATO hamstrung by EU regulation and NATO interoperability standards. Europe needs to

achieve the superior industrial capacity required to win an attritional war, fast enough.

CONCLUSION

Warfighting with fewer US conventional capabilities, troops and enablers will be significantly more difficult for NATO. Ensuring European NATO Allies, together with Canada, can achieve the same effects requires planning, regardless of how politically sensitive this may be. Such contingency planning is not a sign of a weak NATO; it is a sign of a NATO ready to face different operational realities to defend its territory.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Pjotr Sauer, "[Russia could attack a Nato country within months, Danish intelligence says](#)," *The Guardian*, 24 September 2026; Angela Skujins, "[Russia could attack NATO by end of decade, German intelligence chief warns](#)," *Euronews*, 15 October 2024.
- ² David Ellison and Tim Sweijs, "[Shields and spears: Nuclear-conventional force balancing and the European deterrence architecture](#)," *HCSS*, January 2026.
- ³ Julianne Smith, "[Russia's hybrid war has entered a dangerous new phase](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, 7 October 2026.
- ⁴ Christopher F. Schuetze and Eric Schmitt, "[US plan is said to pull a third of fighter jets it provides NATO for Europe](#)," *The New York Times*, 12 June 2026.
- ⁵ Max Bergmann and Otto Svendsen, "[How Europe can defend itself with less America](#)," *CSIS*, October 2025.
- ⁶ IISS has produced excellent analysis on what a European way of war entirely independent of the US could look like in a 'fight tonight' scenario. See: Ruben Stewart, "[A European way of war without the United States](#)," *IISS*, 15 June 2026.
- ⁷ The JEF's 1+1 mechanism means that only the UK (as the Framework Nation) and one other country are required to launch a JEF activity.
- ⁸ European Council, "[Strengthening military mobility in the EU](#)," last updated 1 July 2026.
- ⁹ Alex Vershinin, "[The attritional art of war: Lessons from the Russian war on Ukraine](#)," *RUSI*, 18 March 2024.
- ¹⁰ Armida van Rij, "[Rearming Europe for deterrence: Short-term priorities and policy priorities](#)," *Centre for European Reform*, June 2026.
- ¹¹ Lotje Boswinkel, "[Europe, deterrence, and long-range strike](#)," *War on the Rocks*, 20 March 2025.
- ¹² Boswinkel, "Europe, deterrence, and long-range strike."
- ¹³ Interview with NATO official, July 2026.

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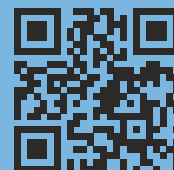
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