

BRIEF

COMMAND STRUCTURES

EUROPEANISING NATO NO. 9

| ANDREA GILLI | MAURO GILLI |

Since 2021, the European Allies have boosted defence spending and increased the forces they make available to NATO. NATO has also refined its command structure. The shift towards Europeans carrying more of the conventional defence burden nevertheless raises a further question: do the current arrangements give European-led commands the staff, authority and access to capabilities they require to fulfil their responsibilities? This brief examines the architecture and recent evolution of the NATO Command Structure (NCS). It proposes a staged approach to further adaptation.

With its July 2026 Ankara Summit, NATO entered a new burden-shifting era, with Europe not just doing more, but most.¹ EU-27 defence expenditure has increased by over 70% since 2021, while the 2022 NATO Force Model has greatly expanded the NATO Force Structure (NFS).² But forces become capabilities only once they are allocated, coordinated and directed. This is the job of the NCS: to provide permanently established, integrated command headquarters (in contrast to the NFS, which consists of multinational and national forces and headquarters that are made available to NATO).

NATO is both a political and a military organisation. Political authority rests with the North Atlantic Council (NAC), supported by the Secretary General, the International Staff and the Military Committee. Military command derives from the NAC and is exercised through the Military Committee and the NCS, which comprises two strategic commands: Allied Command Operations (ACO), under the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), and Allied Command Transformation.³ Located at SHAPE in

Mons, ACO plans and executes NATO operations through three top-level warfighting Joint Force Commands (JFCs: Brunssum, Naples and Norfolk), the Joint Support and Enabling Command (JSEC) in Ulm (which supports reinforcement and sustainment across Europe), and AIRCOM, LANDCOM and MARCOM (which provide Alliance-wide domain expertise and deployable component commands).⁴ While NATO maintains permanent command headquarters through the NCS, most of its forces remain under national command until transferred to NATO authority.⁵

Forces become capabilities only once they are allocated, coordinated and directed

The current NCS architecture largely derives from reforms carried out between 2010 and 2018.⁶ Since then, there have been further refinements both to address the higher threat from Russia and to integrate Finland and Sweden into the NCS.⁷ The most important political change occurred in February 2026, when Allies agreed to place all three JFCs under European leadership (Norfolk under the UK, Naples under Italy, and Brunssum under a German-Polish rotation), while the US will retain SACEUR and lead all three theatre component commands—AIRCOM, LANDCOM and MARCOM.⁸

OLD AND NEW CHALLENGES

This iteration of the NCS faces both traditional and emerging challenges.

Regionalisation vs Alliance-wide solidarity. NATO has historically seen a tension between

regional specialisation and Alliance-wide solidarity. Concentrating forces and responsibilities on the threats closest to Allies can improve the economic efficiency and military effectiveness of collective defence. But this collides with NATO's founding logic of solidarity, requiring Allies to support each other whenever and wherever they are needed.

National sovereignty vs coalition effectiveness.

The NCS has also traditionally had to balance commanders' needs for clear and predictable national force commitments with the consensual nature of an Alliance of sovereign democracies, in which foreign military operations require domestic approval.⁹ The resulting compromise resembles the US Unified Command Plan—it has defined chains of command and channels from commanders to resources, but does not assign organic forces to any JFC.

The American in the room. The NCS was built around the political role and unmatched capabilities, both enablers and combat assets, provided by the US.¹⁰ However, with US-driven burden-shifting, Europeans will likely have to fight differently, relying more heavily on mass and resilience and less on US-inspired information-intensive precision and manoeuvre warfare.¹¹ A different NCS will thus be needed.

Europeans will likely have to fight differently, relying more heavily on mass and resilience

A structure sized for yesterday's force. The backbone of the current NCS was designed when NATO planned smaller, less demanding and non-simultaneous operations. In recent years, NATO has adopted a clearer regional framework for the NFS: among others, the Multi-Corps Land Component Command in Mikkeli, Finland, supports northern land operations, while 1 German-Netherlands Corps covers Estonia and Latvia, allowing Multinational Corps Northeast to concentrate on Lithuania and Poland.¹² However, these and other developments require coordination across regions. At the same time, simultaneous demands from the three JFCs could stretch AIRCOM, LANDCOM and MARCOM's capacity to plan, coordinate and support operations. The question is whether NCS

staffing, support arrangements and command relationships have kept pace with these developments in the NFS.¹³

Centralisation versus innovation. Any command structure faces a tension between central procurement decisions and regional employment choices. With more contingencies and faster technological change, a possible adaptation could entail pre-allocating national forces to the NATO JFCs which would then not only have greater responsibility over them but also, eventually over their equipment.¹⁴ Greater regional input could improve integration between assigned forces and accelerate adaptation, but divergent regional requirements could weaken Alliance-wide interoperability, standardisation and efficiency.

A STAGED REFORM

Over the past few years, various proposals have tried to address the NCS conundrum: some have called for additional geographic JFCs, others for stronger force integration, and others still for widening the responsibilities of the current JFCs.¹⁵ Each is sensible, but none—nor any previous NCS reform—has fully addressed the NCS's challenges. As a basic principle, NATO should strive to match command responsibilities with the personnel, capabilities and authority required to fulfil them. We propose four priorities.

Reassess capabilities, way of war and European capacity.

Before redesigning the NCS, NATO needs first to establish what capabilities are required to fulfil its missions, including ISR, communications, strategic lift, air and missile defence, space and logistics. Second, NATO should establish which of these capabilities the US would continue to provide under different levels of US participation. Third, it will be necessary to understand what capabilities European countries should and are able to generate. A reassessment of NATO's existing way of war should then seek to compensate for gaps through different combinations of mass, resilience, precision and integration. The NCS reform should then follow. If European forces can generate the capabilities and enablers required at lower levels of US participation, changes to the command structure may be necessary to match European

responsibility with capacity. A central issue concerns access to AIRCOM, LANDCOM and MARCOM during simultaneous operations: if European forces are expected to assume greater responsibility across multiple operations, a different arrangement within the NCS may be necessary to ensure that JFCs have reliable access to these commands and their capabilities.

Connect operational gaps to acquisition. The JFCs' assessments should carry greater weight in translating regional requirements into capability priorities through NATO's existing defence planning process—thus acquiring some responsibilities from NATO SHAPE. The objective should be to shorten the interval between identifying and filling operational gaps. For rapidly evolving technologies, the JFCs should help define operational challenges, test solutions and assess their integration with assigned forces. NATO DIANA offers one route for experimentation and adoption, as demonstrated in similar settings with ACO.¹⁶ Common interoperability requirements should guide this process so that regional innovation strengthens, rather than undermines, Alliance-wide effectiveness.

Enhance regional command capacity. NATO should build on existing regional headquarters and subordinate command structures, ensuring adequate permanent staffing and the exercising of command relationships with the formations assigned to their plans. Regional specialisation supports this transition, but NATO must also preserve the ability to reinforce elsewhere. Allies should thus agree in advance the conditions for releasing and reassigning national reserves—and exercise their movement across JFC boundaries. The maritime elements of the ARF provide instruments for this, but their availability amidst competing demands must be considered.

Expand headquarters where operational demands justify it. NATO should assess whether NFS headquarters have clear and coherent operational relationships with the NCS, avoiding overlapping responsibilities and gaps in coverage while enabling coordinated access to shared capabilities and infrastructure. Where additional staffing, stronger subordinate headquarters and clearer command relationships cannot resolve excessive workloads, additional JFCs may be

warranted. A move to four or even five JFCs (West, North, Central, South-East and South) should, however, be weighed against NATO's longstanding shortage of qualified personnel to staff its command structure.¹⁷ Any reorganisation must preserve Alliance-wide reinforcement and sustainment, including JSEC's enabling role and follow operational requirements: additional headquarters are, in fact, useful only where they improve NATO's ability to employ available forces.

Any move should be weighed against NATO's longstanding shortage of qualified personnel to staff its command structure

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

This process must be staged as the appropriate command structure will depend on the scale of American retrenchment, which remains uncertain, as well as on the underlying and resulting political bargain among the rest of the Allies—which cannot be known *ex ante*. In May 2026, the US notified Allies that it would reduce some capabilities assigned to NATO defence plans; in autumn, additional changes will be introduced through the European Force Posture Review.¹⁸ NATO should not design a single architecture for an uncertain future but design one around Europe's growing responsibilities, a realistic assessment of its capabilities (and thus way of war) and likely future US support. A deep and sustained US withdrawal, for example, could require stronger regional commands and more assured force assignments, eventually with additional geographic JFCs.

NATO has squared these trade-offs before, but only because the US has been willing and able to balance competing needs and national preferences. The US expectation for its 'NATO 3.0' changes that condition. Europeans will now have to strike those bargains themselves. The challenge, then, is not to Europeanise the NATO command structure, but to build the political and military arrangements that let Europeans carry more without fragmenting the Alliance.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jonathan Burchell, "[The Europe Force Posture Review and the Transition to NATO 3.0](#)," CSIS, 25 August 2026.
- ² European Defence Agency, "[Defence Data 2025-2026](#)," 5–6; John R Deni, "[The new NATO Force Model: ready for launch?](#)" *NATO Defense College*, May 2024.
- ³ Since ACT is responsible for future capabilities and warfare development, handling training, doctrine development and concept testing, it is not discussed here as the bulk of the command structure pertains to ACO's responsibilities: exercises, current operations and warfighting.
- ⁴ Gregory W Pedlow, "[The Evolution of NATO's Command Structure, 1951–2009](#)," *SHAPE Historical Office*.
- ⁵ (Partial) exceptions include NATO's Standing Naval Forces (permanent multinational groups composed of rotating national contributions: Standing NATO Maritime Group 1, Standing NATO Maritime Group 2, Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 1 and Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2), Forward Land Forces, and NATO's air policing missions.
- ⁶ Such reforms were subjected to several criticism. For a discussion, see: Scott Boston, Michael Johnson, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Yvonne K Crane, "[Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority](#)," *Research Report* (RAND Corporation, 2018).
- ⁷ Primarily, in 2025, JSEC transitioned from the NFS to the NCS, a new Combined Air Operations Centre opened in Bodø, Norway, and Denmark, Finland and Sweden transferred under the responsibility of JFC Norfolk, with JFC Brunssum remaining responsible for the Baltic region.
- ⁸ NATO, "[European Allies to take on new leadership roles in NATO's Command Structure](#)," 6 February 2026.
- ⁹ David P Auerswald and Stephen M Saideman, *NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone* (Princeton University Press, 2014).
- ¹⁰ Barry R Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* 28:1 (2003), 5-46.
- ¹¹ Barry R Posen, "Europe Can Defend Itself," *Survival* 62:6 (2020), 7–34; Ruben Stewart, "A European Way of War Without the United States," *Survival*, 68:3 (June-July 2026), 7-34. This raises a broader question about the Multi-Domain Operations-driven transformation of NATO which increases the dependence on very scarce elements—enablers, competent staff officers, and the integration of emerging and disruptive technologies into C4ISR infrastructures. See Andrea Gilli, Mauro Gilli and Gorana Grgić, "NATO, multi-domain operations and the future of the Atlantic Alliance," *Comparative Strategy* 44:1 (2025), 73-91.
- ¹² Additionally, in 2024, the NATO Rapid Deployable Corps-Italy assumed command of the newly activated Allied Reaction Force as part of the new NATO Force Model. Five Commander Task Forces (Atlantic, North, Mediterranean, Baltic and Black Sea) were created to plan and command assigned forces.
- ¹³ Another related issue concerns JFC boundaries: the December 2025 reassignment of Denmark, Finland and Sweden to Norfolk illustrates this requirement: maritime reinforcement routes through the Danish Straits connect Norfolk's area to the Baltic states under Brunssum, requiring coordinated protection, movement and reception of forces across the command boundary.
- ¹⁴ Aimée Fox, *Learning to Fight: Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914-1918* (Cambridge University Press, 2018); Jon R. Lindsay, *Information Technology and Military Power* (Cornell University Press, 2020)
- ¹⁵ Gintaras Bagdonas, "[Military Command and Control](#)," *ICDS*, July 2023; Richard D Hooker, Jr., "[A New NATO Command Structure](#)," *Atlantic Council*, June 2024; Richard D. Hooker, Jr., with Max Molot, *Building a Stronger Europe: A Companion to the Belfer Center Task Force Report on a New Transatlantic Bargain* (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2025); Rafael Loss, Marta Prochwicz Jazowska and Jana Puglierin, "[Making defence European again](#)," *ECFR*, 2026.
- ¹⁶ NATO DIANA, "[NATO DIANA selects innovators to drive decision superiority for Allied warfighters](#)," 9 July 2026.
- ¹⁷ Andrea Gilli, Mauro Gilli and Niccolò Petrelli, "[How To Defend EUkraine: What are the Military Options](#)," Policy Brief n.37, *IEP@Bocconi*, 2025.
- ¹⁸ Markus Wacket and Linda Pasquini, "[Report: US to cut strategic bombers and warships available to NATO in a crisis](#)," *Defense News*, 26 May 2026.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

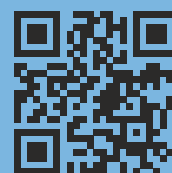
ANDREA GILLI

Dr Andrea Gilli is Lecturer in Strategic Studies at the University of St Andrews, Senior Advisor to the Office of the Undersecretary of State for Defence in Italy and Associate Fellow at IEP@Bocconi.

MAURO GILLI

Dr Mauro Gilli is Professor of Military Technology and Strategy at the Hertie School in Berlin.

 ICDS.TALLINN
 @ICDS-TALLINN.BSKY.SOCIAL
 @ICDS_TALLINN
 ICDS-TALLINN
 WWW.ICDS.EE



Disclaimer: The views and opinions contained in this paper are solely of its author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the International Centre for Defence and Security or any other organisation.

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
63/4 NARVA RD., 10120 TALLINN, ESTONIA
INFO@ICDS.EE

ISSN 2228-2076