

BRIEF

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| NELE LOORENTS |

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine prompted NATO to reassess its deterrence and defence posture, including on its eastern flank. The Alliance has since taken significant measures to enhance this posture. It has begun to shift from a deterrence by punishment strategy to a proactive deterrence by denial or forward defence strategy, vowing that NATO "will continue to protect its populations and defend every inch of Allied territory at all times".¹ It has bolstered Allied presence on the eastern flank, and adopted a new NATO Force Model for response forces and new regional defence plans. But in the end, the credibility of its deterrence rests on its ability to conduct large-scale multi-domain collective defence operations. This will require further enhancement of Europe's military capacity.

WHY THE PLANS MATTER

The adoption of a new generation of regional defence plans at the Vilnius Summit in 2023 was one of the most significant enhancements to NATO's deterrence and defence posture.² These plans are meant to equip the Allies to counter the main threats to their security simultaneously from multiple directions: Russia, as the most significant direct military threat to Euro-Atlantic security; and terrorism, as the main asymmetric threat.

Defence plans are crucial for deterring potential aggressors and thus for maintaining peace and security. NATO's new regional defence plans detail the steps and resources needed to protect specific regions of Alliance territory from attack. They also promote coordination and cooperation among

Allies with the aim of ensuring a unified and effective response in times of crisis. They are widely considered to be a substantial improvement on the previous generation of strategic and domain-specific plans, collectively known as the Graduated Response Plans (GRP).

There are three new sets of plans. One covers the Atlantic and European Arctic and is led by Joint Force Command (JFC) Norfolk. The second covers the Baltic region and central Europe and is led by JFC Brunssum, and the third covers the Mediterranean and Black Sea and is led by JFC Naples.³ They set out in detail how NATO forces would defend the Alliance, including by assigning specific forces and capabilities and stipulating levels of readiness. They place a particular focus on ensuring rapid reinforcement. One essential difference from the GRPs is that all forces "will be pre-assigned to specific plans".⁴ This clarity allows for a response to any threat at very short notice, enhancing the Alliance's ability to perform its collective defence task. But the successful implementation of the plans, and thus the credibility of NATO's deterrence posture, requires the Allies to fulfil their commitment to their full resourcing and regular exercising.

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The new plans are supported by a significant upgrade to NATO's response forces. The new NATO Force Model contains three tiers of forces held at graduated readiness, from 10 to 180

days, with an overall size of 800 000 troops.⁵ This includes 300 000 combat-capable troops held at 30 days readiness (previously, the NATO Response Force was expected to deliver 40 000 troops within 15 days). The new plans will also require enhancements to NATO's command and control structure, which must be agile, resilient and properly staffed if it is to lead high-intensity, multi-domain collective defence operations.

PROGRESS

The NATO exercise Steadfast Defender 24 tested aspects of the new regional plans for the first time. This was the largest NATO exercise since the Cold War, featuring more than 90 000 troops, more than 50 ships, more than 80 aircraft, and more than 1 100 combat vehicles from all 32 Allies. The focus was on promoting readiness across all domains and at all levels of command.⁶

However, the key process of determining individual Allies' responsibilities under the regional defence plans is still ongoing at NATO headquarters. In simple terms, this allocation should be based on NATO's overall principle of fair burden-sharing. In practical terms, the outcome will, as usual, depend on negotiations between the NATO defence planners and the Allies, collectively and individually. NATO officials have also indicated that the new plans will expect more integration of national forces, although what this implies is not clear.⁷ As the regional defence plans are classified, there is very little public visibility either on the progress of the process, or on its results in terms of the concrete requirements placed on each Ally. Following the pre-Summit meeting of NATO defence ministers in June, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg merely reported that the issue had been discussed.⁸

What is clear, though, is that collectively, NATO has serious capability gaps that will need to be addressed if the defence plans are to be credible and to contribute to robust deterrence. One well-known example is air defence. There are several multinational initiatives intended to boost NATO's air defence, such the German-led European Sky Shield Initiative, which aims to bolster European air and missile defence

through joint acquisition.⁹ Meanwhile, several Allies have reached agreements to jointly acquire air defence missile systems and missiles.¹⁰ Still, according to some assessments, NATO presently has only 5 percent of what is needed to protect its eastern flank and this capability shortfall will likely remain for years to come.¹¹

Other shortfalls in the capabilities of the European Allies include naval forces, air enablers and battle-decisive ammunition.¹² Continuing assistance to Ukraine means that these critical gaps will only become more stretched. The key question regarding the new regional defence plans is whether they will motivate the Allies, especially in Europe, to make the investments required to address these longstanding shortfalls.

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Concerning progress in implementing the NATO Force Model, the Alliance has been a little more open. According to NATO's latest estimates, there are some 3.4 million military personnel serving in Allied countries, including 2.1 million in NATO Europe and Canada.¹³ After the pre-summit meeting of defence ministers, Stoltenberg announced that of these, NATO already has 500 000 troops at high readiness in all domains.¹⁴ A potential weakness, though, is that this figure refers to what Allies have proposed to NATO, not what NATO has asked from them based on the requirements of the new plans. The UK, for example, volunteered a contribution to the New Force Model as early as June 2022, well before the new plans were agreed in Vilnius.¹⁵ There may thus be a mismatch between the plans and the forces available to NATO to implement them. For example, the new plans reportedly require significant numbers of medium and heavy units, especially at 10-30 days (tier 2) readiness, which the Allies do not have in sufficient quantities and even then at too low readiness.¹⁶

WAY FORWARD

At the Vilnius Summit, Allies committed to fully resourcing and regularly exercising the regional defence plans in order to be prepared for high-intensity, multi-domain collective defence.¹⁷ The assignment of concrete capability targets, derived from the capability requirements that stem from these plans, is currently ongoing as part of NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). This should be finalised by the autumn of 2025. But there is a risk, given that the number of capability targets to be apportioned to the European Allies is expected to increase by about a third, that some will remain unallocated, as has been the case in earlier iterations of the NDPP.¹⁸

Insufficient spending by the European Allies has the potential to undermine the NATO defence planning process, create political tensions within the Alliance, and weaken deterrence

The NDPP, meanwhile, is a long process. It takes years from decision making to implementation of capability targets. Insufficient spending by the European Allies during the coming period has the potential to undermine the NDPP, create political tensions within the Alliance, and weaken deterrence. In an effort to avoid this outcome, the Baltic defence ministers have proposed that NATO should agree an Allied Capability Delivery Commitment at the Washington Summit. This would focus on the rapid delivery of critical capabilities, such as air and missile defence, long-range fires, and battle-decisive munitions in the short to medium term (up to 5 years), based on a fair burden-sharing approach. One crucial aspect of the proposal is the allocation of 2.5% of GDP to defence. However, as one third of Allies are still to reach NATO's 2% of GDP guideline ten years after the adoption of the defence investment pledge at the Wales Summit, it seems unlikely that this ambition will be achieved.¹⁹ Options, such as funding defence capability programmes through the issue of bonds or by a relaxation of the lending rules of the European Investment Bank are also under consideration in the EU, but leaders have struggled to find agreement on such sensitive proposals.²⁰

CONCLUSION

NATO has made significant changes to its deterrence and defence posture on its eastern flank in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These changes include adopting new regional defence plans, increasing Allied presence, and creating a new NATO Force Model. The new regional defence plans aim to counter the main threats to Alliance security and promote coordination among member states. However, there are gaps in NATO's military capabilities, particularly in air defence, naval forces, and battle-decisive ammunition. To fully implement the new regional defence plans, preserve the credibility of the Alliance, and effectively deter Russia, these shortfalls will need to be urgently addressed.

ENDNOTES

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- ² NATO, "[Vilnius Summit Communiqué Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Vilnius 11 July 2023](#)," press release (2023) 001, 11 July 2023, para 34.
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