

# Is NATO Ready for War?

## *An Assessment of Allies' Efforts to Strengthen Defense and Deterrence since the 2022 Madrid Summit*

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### *Executive Summary*

Two years ago, NATO adopted a “back to the future” strategy of forward defense and deterrence following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To implement it, allies committed to take various measures to strengthen their deterrence and defense at the 2022 Madrid Summit. As NATO leaders gather in Washington for the alliance’s 75th anniversary summit, this paper takes stock of allied efforts to strengthen collective defense. It finds they have made substantial progress on defense spending, forward defense, high-readiness forces, command and control, collective defense exercises, and integrating Finland and Sweden—achievements which should be recognized in Washington. However, while NATO might be ready for war, the question remains whether it is ready to fight—and thereby deter—a protracted war. To meet this goal, allies still need to spend more, boost industrial capacity, address critical capability gaps, and bolster national resilience.

### *Introduction*

*Si vis pacem, para bellum.* If you want peace, prepare for war. If the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) did not already have a **motto**—*animus in consulendo liber*, “in discussion a free mind”—this Latin adage would fit the alliance’s purpose quite well. The phrase conveys a piece of timeless deterrence logic: preparing for war might be the best way of averting it.

After Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, NATO **adopted** a new “**back to the future**” strategic concept which returned Russia to its Cold War status of adversary and put deterrence and defense back at the heart of alliance strategy. NATO revealed the concept at the 2022 Madrid Summit alongside a wide range of commitments which NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg **described** as amounting to a “fundamental shift to our deterrence and defence.”

In less than a month, NATO leaders will gather in Washington for the alliance’s 75th anniversary summit. Ahead of that historic meeting, this paper takes stock of the progress NATO allies have made in implementing the commitments made two years ago in Madrid.

The paper comprises three sections. The first briefly recaps NATO’s efforts to strengthen defense and deterrence since 2014 and considers Russia’s current threat to NATO. The second assesses the progress made by NATO allies in implementing their Madrid commitments to strengthen deterrence and defense across the nine issue areas described in the Madrid Summit Declaration. The final section uses this assessment to gauge whether NATO is ready for war.

## *The Road to Washington*

NATO’s journey toward stronger deterrence and defense **began** at the 2014 Wales Summit where allies responded to Russia’s annexation of Crimea by making long-term commitments to raise defense spending above 2 percent of GDP. Their near-term focus was on adapting NATO’s force posture. This started with the 2014 **Readiness Action Plan**, followed by establishing four **Enhanced Forward Presence** (EFP) multinational battlegroups in the east in 2016. In 2018, the **NATO Readiness Initiative** improved the state of NATO’s high-readiness forces.

While the 2022 Strategic Concept garnered public attention, another NATO concept **agreed** upon in 2020 was already quietly revolutionizing deterrence and defense: the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) concept. The DDA **focuses** on “force employment to deter and defend today.” Following Russia’s 2022 invasion, NATO **activated** its defense plans, making 40,000 troops—plus air, naval, and other assets—available to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). Four new EFP **missions** followed, alongside a strengthened maritime posture, air policing, air defense, and multinational exercises.

NATO planning was further transformed at last year’s Vilnius summit with the unveiling of **new defense plans**, another product of the DDA. “The DDA family of plans,” as SACEUR, U.S. general Christopher G. Cavoli, **describes** them, include three regional plans (covering northern, central, and southern Europe) alongside domain-specific plans (for land, air, maritime, cyber, and space forces) as well as plans for logistics and sustainment. As one recent **analysis** suggests: “None of this would have been possible without the DDA.”

## *Ready for War?*

Russia’s actions in Ukraine confirmed the fears of many that Vladimir Putin would seek to continue the Stalinist subjugation of Russia’s near abroad. The war suggests that the worst-case thinking about Russia’s “**maximum intentions**” that historically guided NATO’s planning is warranted for the foreseeable future. Putin’s apparent propensity for aggression, risk taking, and strategic miscalculation makes him a dangerous adversary—and a difficult one to deter.

Russia has seen **staggering losses** in Ukraine but has “almost completely reconstituted militarily” to **pre-war levels** thanks to national mobilization and a **war economy** supported by China, Iran, and North Korea. Beyond Ukraine, Russia is making **nuclear threats** against NATO and stepping up **hybrid threats** across Europe. Several European **leaders** have warned that Russia could attack NATO allies within **three, four, five, or eight** years. Not only is China helping Russia’s military reconstitute, but the

prospect of coordinated aggression between Moscow and Beijing has many implications for NATO—the most serious being the **implications** for U.S. force posture in Europe.

To **paraphrase** the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, what kind of war should NATO prepare for?<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most stressing scenario is a rapid territory seizure by Russian forces in the Baltic region. Variations of this scenario have been **described**, **wargamed**, and **analyzed** in recent years, almost becoming cliché, but it should not be dismissed.<sup>2</sup> In military planning **jargon**, it is the “most likely” and “most dangerous” course of action for Russia to take.

It is the likeliest scenario for any Russian conventional attack on NATO because the local force balance drastically favors Russia. This does not mean it is likely—a lot of things would have to **go badly** for Russia to consider this a good option—just that it might be the most likely NATO-Russia war scenario. Despite all the warnings from NATO leaders, **the jury is still out** on whether (and why) Russia would invade.

The consequences mean NATO planners must be prepared, as this kind of invasion risks nuclear escalation and is hard to reverse. Any NATO operation to regain lost ground would require establishing air superiority and control of the Baltic Sea before massing a significant local ground force. Even with NATO assurances, this situation is sufficiently threatening under **Russian doctrine** for Moscow to deploy non-strategic nuclear weapons for coercive or military purposes—forcing NATO to threaten nuclear use to compel withdrawal and reestablish deterrence.

This is why Baltic officials describe the best **strategy** as “repel, don’t expel.” It is also why NATO’s new strategic concept returned deterrence by denial and forward defense to the core of alliance strategy. As with the **Cold War**, deterrence by punishment—which relies primarily on the “sword” of U.S., UK, and French strategic nuclear forces—will continue to do **most of the heavy lifting** to deter the most serious threats to NATO allies. But just like in the Cold War, NATO allies will increasingly rely on forward-based “shield” forces to **strengthen** conventional deterrence and defense. This paper focuses on the commitments made by NATO allies in Madrid to do just this.<sup>3</sup> The next section analyzes these commitments in detail.

## *From Madrid to Washington: Assessing Commitments by NATO Allies to Strengthen Deterrence and Defense*

### **DEFENSE SPENDING**

*“We reaffirm our commitment to the Defence Investment Pledge in its entirety. We will build on that pledge and decide next year on subsequent commitments beyond 2024.” – Madrid Summit Declaration*

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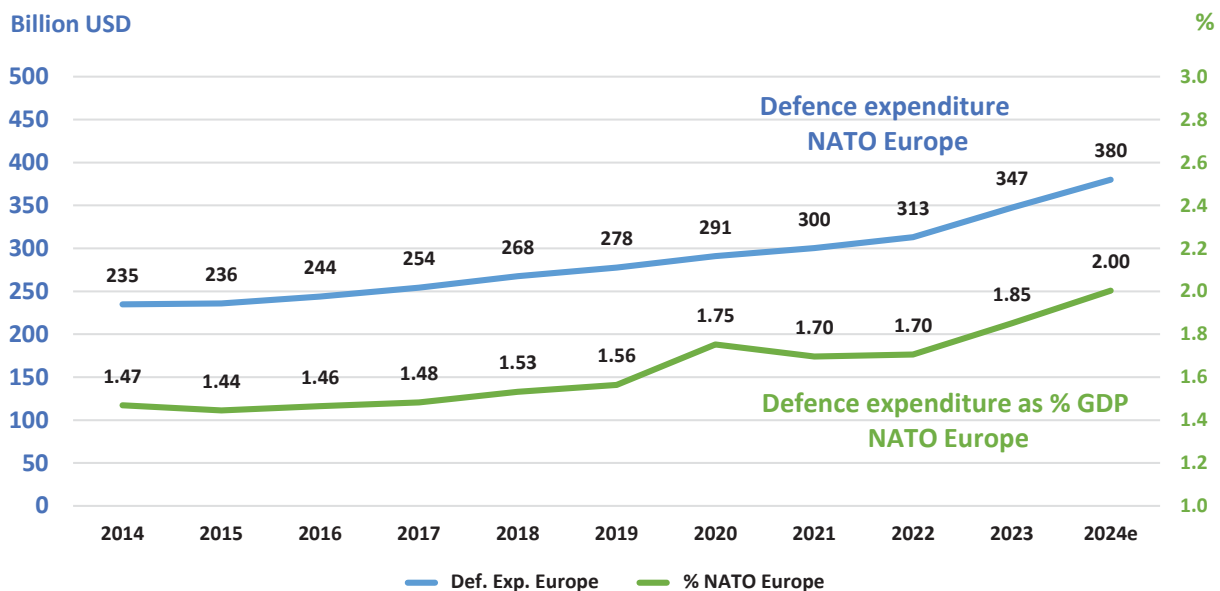
1 As Clausewitz recommended in his classic text, *On War*: “The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking.

2 The two main variations are a surprise “blitzkrieg” invasion from Russia into Estonia and Latvia to seize and hold territory or conduct a “thunder run” to Tallinn or Riga (as was attempted in Ukraine in February 2022); or an attack on the vulnerable 100 km Suwalki Gap between Lithuania and Poland, staged from Belarus, to cut off the Baltic region via Kaliningrad. See, for example, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/future-zeitenwende-scenari-o-3-russia-masses-troops-latvian-border>; <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/nato-cannot-take-russias-weakness-in-the-baltic-theater-for-granted/>; <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2945&context=parameters>; [https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ICDS\\_Analysis\\_Constructing\\_Deterrence\\_in\\_the\\_Baltic\\_States\\_Jonatan\\_Vseiov\\_February\\_2021-1.pdf](https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ICDS_Analysis_Constructing_Deterrence_in_the_Baltic_States_Jonatan_Vseiov_February_2021-1.pdf); <https://www.csis.org/analysis/repel-dont-expel>; and <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/03/nato-must-prepare-to-defend-its-weakest-point-the-suwalki-corridor/>.

3 As well as nuclear threats, the “ready for war” scenarios outlined above would also feature hybrid threats such as cyberattacks, disinformation, economic coercion, and critical infrastructure damage. However, this paper focuses primarily on NATO’s efforts to strengthen conventional deterrence and defense—not nuclear or hybrid—given that this is the main focus of the Madrid commitments and the most urgent priority for allies under the new strategic concept.

The 2014 **Defense Investment Pledge** (DIP) required allies to invest at least 2 percent of GDP on defense—and at least 20 percent of that on modernization—by 2024. Last year in Vilnius, **allies agreed** that 2 percent would become “a minimum.” While in Wales only three allies met the target, this year 18 are **projected** to do so. NATO **estimates** that this year will be the first where European NATO allies invest 2 percent of their combined GDP. As Figure 1 shows, European allies have increased their investment by around a third since 2014, to a total of \$380 billion.

Figure 1: European NATO Defense Expenditures, 2014–2024



Source: “Secretary General welcomes unprecedented rise in NATO defence spending,” NATO, February 14, 2024, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_222664.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_222664.htm).

Recent announcements on spending included Norway’s “**historic boost**” to its spending, which will double over the next 12 years. The UK government recently **announced** a “fully funded plan” to reach 2.5 percent by 2030—an extra £75 billion (\$96 billion). Meanwhile, despite **announcing** an additional funded CAD 8.1 billion (\$5.9 billion) by 2030, Canada would still fall short at 1.76 percent of GDP.

Despite solid progress on defense spending since Madrid, three important questions remain for NATO allies. The first is whether the “2 percent as a minimum” target agreed to in Vilnius is enough to maintain a positive trajectory and deliver the capabilities required for a strong forward defense. The second is what they are spending money on. European allies need to address their known **capability gaps** and remove their reliance on the United States to conduct high-end collective defense **missions**. The final question is how the money is being spent. European allies have been spending more but **cooperating less**, making defense more expensive and inefficient than it needs to be.

## FORWARD DEFENSE FORCES

*“Allies have committed to deploy additional robust in-place combat-ready forces on our eastern flank, to be scaled up from the existing battle groups to brigade-size units where and when required . . . [including] establishing division-level structures.” – Madrid Summit Declaration*

The main component of NATO’s revitalized forward defense is the eight EFP missions, including multinational forces from several allies led by a framework nation. The status of each mission is set out below, based on the latest available data. This analysis highlights progress against the two new Madrid **commitments**: to scale up each mission to “brigade-size units” (up to 5,000 personnel) and to establish “division-level structures.”

**Table 1: NATO Enhanced Forward Presence Progress**

<b>EFP Bulgaria (Kabile)</b>		<b>Lead:</b> Italy	<b>Contributors:</b> Albania, Greece, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Turkey, United States		<b>Force size:</b> 945
<b>Battlegroup exercised?</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>Brigade reinforcement exercised?</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>Plans to scale up to brigade level?</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>Progress toward “brigade-size units”:</b> Exercise Iron Strike in November 2023 <b>proved</b> integration at battlegroup level. The Bulgarian government <b>announced</b> a €6 billion (\$6.5 billion) investment in infrastructure to support the deployment of a brigade, while Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov <b>confirmed</b> Bulgaria’s intent “to grow to the brigade level.”					
<b>Progress toward “division-level structures”:</b> EFP Bulgaria is coordinated by NATO Multinational Division Southeast (MND-SE), which was <b>established</b> in 2018.					

<b>EFP Estonia (Tapa)</b>		<b>Lead:</b> United Kingdom	<b>Contributors:</b> France, Iceland		<b>Force size:</b> 1,373
<b>Battlegroup exercised?</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>Brigade reinforcement exercised?</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>Plans to scale up to brigade level?</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>Progress toward “brigade-size units”:</b> The United Kingdom and Estonia <b>agreed</b> in July 2023 to hold an armored brigade at high readiness in the United Kingdom, “consistently exercise” brigade force projection, and preposition ammunition and equipment forward. A UK brigade deployed to Estonia in May 2023 ( <b>Exercise Spring Storm</b> ) and April 2024 ( <b>Exercise Steadfast Defender</b> ).					
<b>Progress toward “division-level structures”:</b> The United Kingdom and Estonia agreed in July 2023 to exercise division headquarters, deploy a UK Divisional Advisory Team, and maintain division-level enablers forward (e.g., air defense, fires, and aviation). Estonia <b>established</b> a national division in 2023 which can be transferred to NATO (under Multinational Corps Northeast).					

<b>EFP Hungary (Tata)</b>		<b>Lead:</b> Hungary	<b>Contributors:</b> Croatia, Italy, Turkey, United States		<b>Force size:</b> 1,054
<b>Battlegroup exercised?</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>Brigade reinforcement exercised?</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>Plans to scale up to brigade level?</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>Progress toward “brigade-size units”:</b> A battlegroup <b>exercised</b> (Exercise Adaptive Hussars 23) with Hungarian brigade-sized forces in November 2023—the “largest military exercise in Hungary for 30 years, with over 5000 troops involved.”					
<b>Progress toward “division-level structures”:</b> EFP Hungary is coordinated by NATO Multinational Division Centre Headquarters in Székesfehérvár, Hungary.					

EFP Latvia (Ādaži)		Lead: Canada	Contributors: Albania, Czech Republic, Iceland, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain		Force size: 1,840
Battlegroup exercised?	YES	Brigade reinforcement exercised?	NO	Plans to scale up to brigade level?	YES
<p><b>Progress toward “brigade-size units”:</b> Latvia and Canada agreed on a <b>roadmap</b> in July 2023 to scale up the multinational battlegroup to “a persistently deployed brigade” by 2026. Canada <b>invested</b> CAD 316 million (\$234 million) on air defense, counter-drone systems, and anti-tank missiles to equip its forces in Latvia. Sweden will <b>contribute</b> a battalion to the mission, rotating with Denmark, from 2025. Exercise Crystal Arrow <b>exercised</b> the EFP battlegroup within a Latvian brigade in March 2024.</p> <p><b>Progress toward “division-level structures”:</b> Headquarters Multinational Division North (HQ MND-N) in Latvia (with elements in Denmark) became <b>fully operational</b> in July 2023, while Latvia <b>agreed</b> to lead development of MND-N “as a fully resourced and enabled warfighting division.” Canada <b>deployed</b> its Forward Command Element in January 2023 to prepare for integration of a Canadian-led brigade headquarters into MND-N.</p>					
EFP Lithuania (Rukla)		Lead: Germany	Contributors: Belgium, Czech Republic, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, United States		Force size: 1,805
Battlegroup exercised?	YES	Brigade reinforcement exercised?	YES	Plans to scale up to brigade level?	YES
<p><b>Progress toward “brigade-size units”:</b> Germany and Lithuania agreed on a <b>roadmap</b> in December 2023 to deliver “a robust and warfighting capable German-led brigade” in Lithuania by the end of 2027. The first permanent German forces <b>arrived</b> in April 2024. Exercise Allied Spirit in March 2024 <b>trained</b> a German army brigade to deliver multinational NATO operations, while Exercise Grand Quadriga <b>exercised</b> the reinforcement of Lithuania to brigade level. However, a range of implementation <b>challenges</b> have been reported, including a lack of infrastructure funding, volunteers, and <b>readiness</b>.</p> <p><b>Progress toward “division-level structures”:</b> The German-led brigade will be <b>subordinate</b> to the German army’s “Division 2025.” EFP Lithuania is commanded by NATO headquarters Multinational Division North-East (HQ MND-NE) in Elblag, Poland, which became <b>fully operational</b> in March 2024. A Lithuanian national division was <b>established</b> last year, with the goal of becoming fully operational by 2030.</p>					
EFP Poland (Orzysz)		Lead: United States	Contributors: Croatia, Romania, United Kingdom		Force size: 1,033
Battlegroup exercised?	YES	Brigade reinforcement exercised?	YES	Plans to scale up to brigade level?	NO
<p><b>Progress toward “brigade-size units”:</b> EFP Poland was the first NATO mission to be <b>exercised</b> at brigade level, in May 2023 (Exercise Griffin Shock). The EFP battlegroup was <b>recently exercised</b> during Exercise Dragon 24. Last year a new prepositioned NATO ammunition storage facility was <b>opened</b> in Powidz, Poland.</p> <p><b>Progress toward “division-level structures”:</b> EFP Poland is also commanded by NATO HQ MND-NE. Exercise Griffin Shock 23 saw MND-NE <b>take command</b> of the U.S. Army’s 2nd Cavalry Regiment.</p>					
EFP Romania (Cincu)		Lead: France	Contributors: Belgium, Luxembourg		Force size: 1,000
Battlegroup exercised?	YES	Brigade reinforcement exercised?	NO	Plans to scale up to brigade level?	NO
<p><b>Progress toward “brigade-size units”:</b> EFP Romania has been led by France since 2022 and <b>includes</b> a forward-deployed brigade headquarters; French tanks, infantry, and artillery; Belgian armored infantry; and a reconnaissance unit from Luxembourg. Last year, EFP Romania held a battlegroup-level <b>exercise</b>, while a French navy carrier strike group <b>conducted</b> operations with land and air forces alongside EFP Romania under NATO command.</p> <p><b>Progress toward “division-level structures”:</b> EFP Romania is coordinated by MND-SE.</p>					



<b>EFP Slovakia (Lest)</b>		<b>Lead:</b> Czech Republic	<b>Contributors:</b> Germany, Slovenia		<b>Force size:</b> 1,056
<b>Battlegroup exercised?</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>Brigade reinforcement exercised?</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>Plans to scale up to brigade level?</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>Progress toward “brigade-size units”:</b> EFP Slovakia <b>became</b> a NATO certified combat battlegroup in October 2023 during Exercise Slovak Shield, which featured around 2,000 soldiers and 200 vehicles.					
<b>Progress toward “division-level structures”:</b> EFP Slovakia is coordinated by MND-SE.					

Source: Based on author's analysis. See embedded hyperlinks for detail. The force composition and size is indicative, as it is based on the latest publicly available NATO data which is dated November 2022: <https://shape.nato.int/efp/efp/fact-sheet>.

NATO forward defense forces are also deployed in the air and at sea. Last year, NATO’s strengthened Air Policing mission **conducted** over 300 intercepts of Russian aircraft in Baltic airspace. Allied air forces also increased contributions to Air Policing and **Air Shielding** (air and missile defense). At sea, allied **Standing Naval Forces** came under SACEUR’s command for the first time in 2022, while a French navy carrier strike group **operated** under NATO command in the Mediterranean—another first.

Significant progress has been made to enhance NATO’s forward defense. Since Madrid, allies have proven the combat readiness of all eight EFP missions with battlegroup-level certification exercises. Four of the eight missions have been exercised at the brigade level to rehearse rapid reinforcement in a crisis. Meanwhile, all eight missions are integrated into NATO’s command structure at the division level. EFP Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland have plans to integrate with new national division-level structures. Meanwhile, NATO allies have strengthened existing missions in the air and at sea. However, only two EFP missions are planning to permanently scale up to brigade size. This is because the Madrid agreement leaves the decision to scale up to the host, framework, and contributing nations. The question remains as to whether even brigade-size missions would be sufficient to deter by denial, given the local force imbalance in Russia’s favor.

## NATO FORCE MODEL

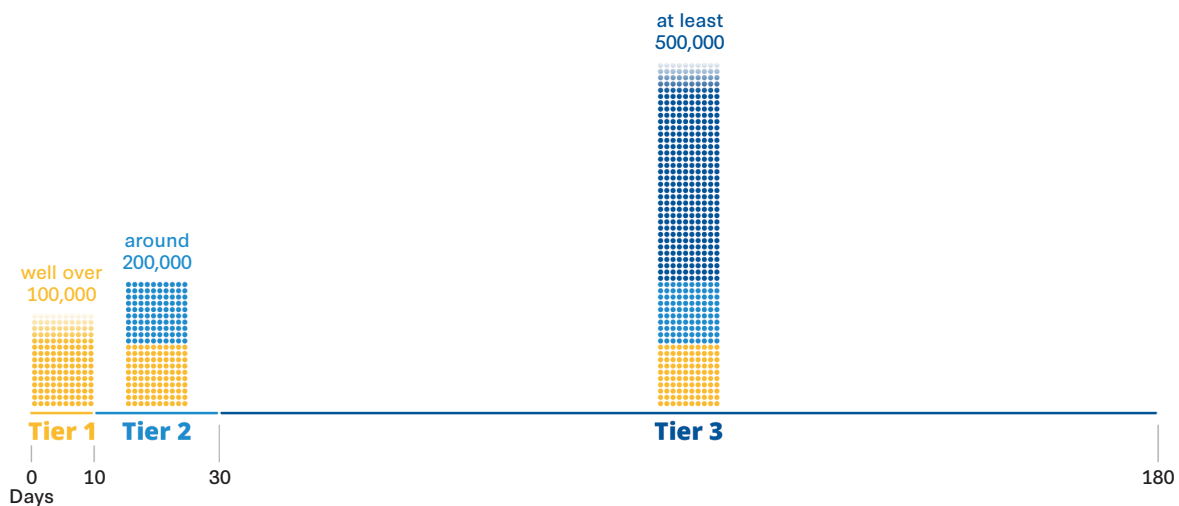
*“We welcome the initial offers by Allies to NATO’s new force model, which will strengthen and modernise the NATO Force Structure and will resource our new generation of military plans.” – Madrid Summit Declaration*

In Madrid, allies agreed to transition to a new force model by 2023. The aim of the **New NATO Force Model** (NFM) is to boost deterrence and defense by providing a much larger pool of forces available to deploy quickly in a crisis. The NFM replaced the 40,000 strong NATO Response Force (NRF). As Figure 2 below shows, it contains three tiers of forces held at graduated readiness, from 10 to 180 days (the NRF’s readiness time was 15 days). The NFM presaged the regional plans agreed a year later in Vilnius, **stating** forces “will be pre-assigned to specific plans.” The NFM also provides the high-readiness forces required for the new Allied Reaction Force, to which NATO will **transitioned** in mid-2024.

Detailed allied contributions to the NFM remain classified, but public announcements **suggest** progress. Germany **agreed** to contribute 30,000 troops and a combination of 85 ships and aircraft mobilizable in 30 days (Tier 2). The United Kingdom **offered** combat aircraft, ships, aircraft carriers,

and “brigade-sized land forces.” The United States has also **placed** much of its 80,000 strong forces in Europe under NATO command, the **most connected** it has been to NATO structures in decades.

**Figure 2: Troop Requirements for NATO Force Model Tiers**



Source: John R. Deni, “The new NATO Force Model: ready for launch?,” NATO Defense College, *Outlook*, no. 4, May 2024, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1937>.

Challenges remain regarding force generation and sustainment. Last year, NATO Military Committee leaders **acknowledged** the remaining work to meet 300,000 but emphasized the importance of knowing what is missing. Additionally, experts such as John R. Deni of the U.S. Army War College have **raised** concerns about readiness. Recruitment and retention challenges in **Europe** and the **United States** undermine readiness, while **demand** for enablers and logistics personnel is going up. Deni **notes** that NATO has established readiness verification processes for Tier 1 and Tier 2 forces, but these have revealed shortfalls.

The authorities for SACEUR to activate and deploy NFM forces pre-crisis will be essential for **delivering** the DDA. As SACEUR **confirmed**, these authorities support “NATO’s ability to execute its plans and helps influence Allies to contribute their own forces.” Yet, allies are not always willing to grant NATO commanders the “transfer of authority” required for optimization and efficiency.<sup>4</sup> This also highlights the significance of aligning NFM force composition with the regional plans, potentially different from the forces allies typically provide.

## COMMAND STRUCTURE

*“Allies have committed to . . . enhanced command and control.” – Madrid Summit Declaration<sup>5</sup>*

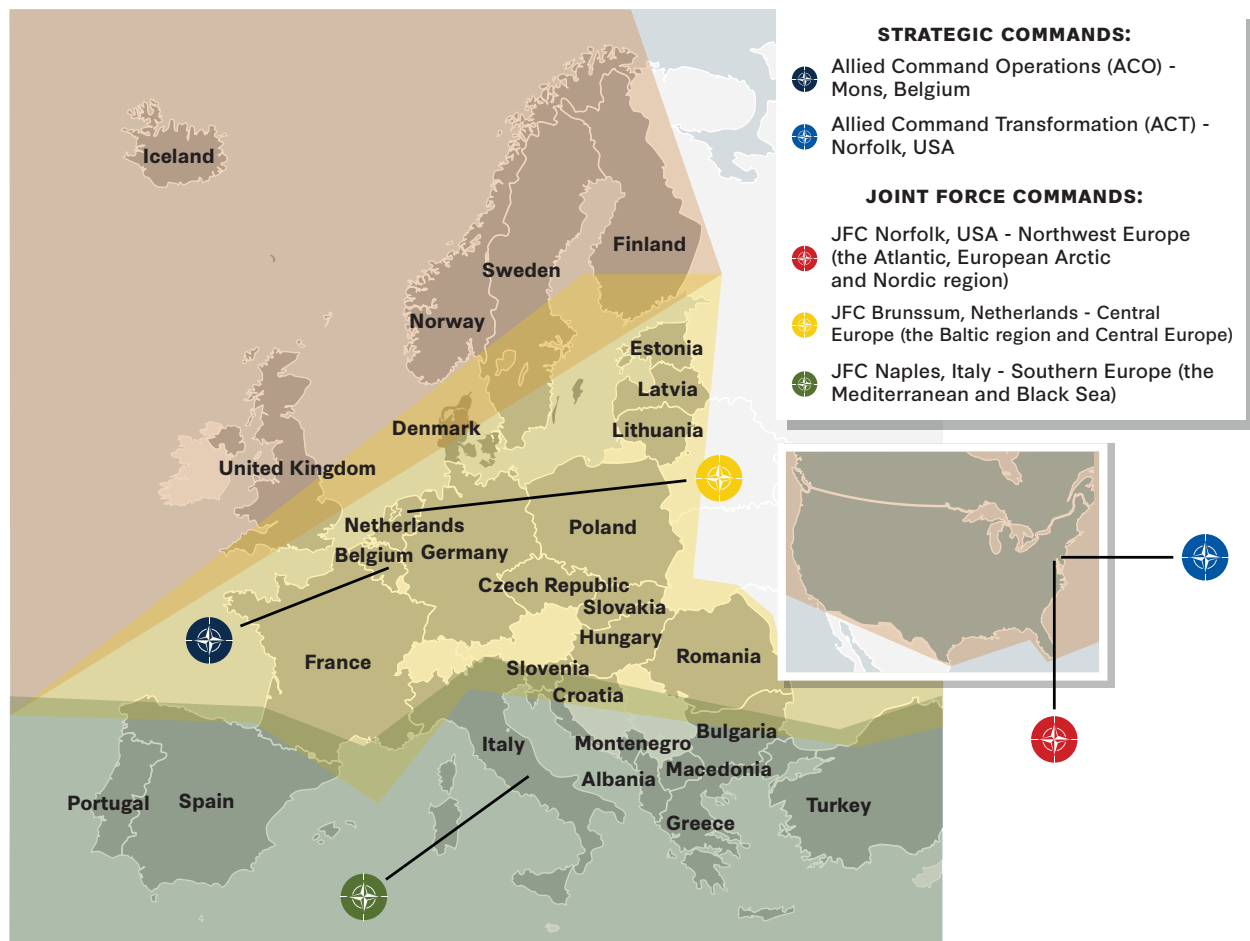
NATO has steadily adapted its command structure since Madrid, vital for the implementation and execution of the regional plans. The NFM’s scale also underscores the need for an updated and modernized structure. Figure 3 shows critical command and control (C2) nodes and how they relate to NATO’s regional plans.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with NATO officials, May 2024.

<sup>5</sup> The declaration also noted: “We welcome the cooperation between Framework Nations and Host Nations in strengthening forces and command and control, including in establishing division-level structures.”



Figure 3: NATO's New Regional Plans and Command Structure



Source: Map compiled by CSIS. It is intended for illustrative purposes only, based on publicly available information. For more details on NATO's Command Structure see: <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/structure.htm>. This map represents NATO's current ambitions as the regional plans have not yet been fully implemented (for example, Finland and Sweden currently remain under JFC Brunssum). For more details on NATO's new regional plans see: <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/216728.htm>.

New headquarters include **Headquarters Multinational Division North (MND N)** in Ādaži, Latvia, which became fully operational in July 2023. In March 2024, **Headquarters Multinational Division Northeast (HQ MND-NE)** in Elbląg, Poland, followed suit. Both have a key role in coordinating EFP missions. In September 2023, the NATO Rapid Deployable Corps Italy (NRDC-ITA) became the interim headquarters of the **Allied Reaction Force (ARF)**.

The addition of Finland and Sweden to NATO also required new C2 arrangements. JFC Norfolk (JFCNF), NATO's newest strategic command, which oversees the northwest Europe regional plan (see Figure 3), **became** fully operational in July 2021 but significantly changed following Finland and Sweden's accession, when a political consensus formed across the Nordic nations to **gather under JFCNF**. To meet this reconfiguration, the JFCNF is being upscaled, with full integration planned for 2025.<sup>6</sup> The JFCNF

<sup>6</sup> Interviews with JFCNF officials, May 2024.

demonstrated its readiness by taking command of Steadfast Defender for one month while the exercise was in its area of responsibility.<sup>7</sup> A new corps-level land component **command** has been proposed in Mikkeli, Finland (about 140 km from the Russian border), likely **vital** for the JFCNF's C2 infrastructure.

If created, Mikkeli would take the number of corps-level commands to the 11 **deemed necessary** by NATO to deliver on regional plans. Streamlining NATO's C2 structures is crucial for robust deterrence and defense. Agile commands such as the German **DEU MARFOR**, capable of **rapid scalability** in crises or supporting DDA activities, are essential. Prioritizing C2 adaptation and exercising should address this need.

## INTEGRATE FINLAND AND SWEDEN

*"We reaffirm our commitment to NATO's Open Door Policy. Today, we have decided to invite Finland and Sweden to become members of NATO and agreed to sign the Accession Protocols." – Madrid Summit Declaration*

The most notable NATO achievement since the Madrid Summit has been Finland and Sweden joining as full NATO members. Following their formal invitation and after nearly two years of political drama, Ankara and Budapest eventually dropped their objections after extracting **concessions** from various allies, including the United States. This sent a resounding political signal to Moscow and added serious deterrent power to NATO's ranks, gaining two highly capable members with the ability to severely constrain Russia's freedom of maneuver in the Baltic Sea.

The process of fully integrating Finland and Sweden into NATO is ongoing, but substantial progress has been made. The integration is helped by the deep military cooperation between the two countries and NATO prior to accession. Both were Enhanced Opportunities Partners (under the **Partnership Interoperability Initiative**) which assessed Finland and Sweden as **more interoperable with NATO** than some existing allies. The integration of the "**formidable**" air power of the Nordic countries has been **developing for decades**, as the recent **integration** of Finnish and Swedish air forces into NATO illustrates.

Several challenges remain to fully integrate Finland and Sweden. These include developing adequate command structure arrangements, adjusting the regional plans and DDA, and taking account of both nations' requirements for defense across domains, including logistics. Analysis **suggests** the critical role here of the United States and United Kingdom, given that the United States recently signed Nordic defense cooperation agreements and the United Kingdom **leads** the Joint Expeditionary Force, which has integrated Finnish and Swedish forces on operations for several years.

## COLLECTIVE DEFENSE EXERCISES

*"We will enhance our collective defense exercises to be prepared for high intensity and multi-domain operations and ensure reinforcement of any ally on short notice." – Madrid Summit Declaration*

NATO has significantly delivered since Madrid on its promise to refocus its exercise program on collective defense. The recent **Steadfast Defender** was the largest NATO exercise since the Cold War, featuring 90,000 personnel from all allies across all domains. It included **maritime** and amphibious drills in the High North and multi-domain exercises across Europe, with a focus on military mobility. Steadfast Defender has been an important tool to test and validate other major lines of effort such as the NFM and **regional plans**.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

NATO's exercise program has focused on multi-domain operations. In the air, Germany hosted and led its largest edition of Air Defender, while **Vigilant Falcon** tested Baltic air policing this May. At sea, **Neptune Strike 2024** included five carrier strike groups in the Mediterranean, and **Dynamic MongOOSE** focused on anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare. The 2023 Baltops **exercise** was the first with Finland participating as an ally.

The newest domains, cyber and space, were also tested. NATO held its dedicated space exercise **Vulcan Guard** in April. The NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, Estonia, hosted the world's largest cyber defense exercise, **Locked Shields**, last year. In June, the Coalition Warrior Interoperability Exercise will **test** interoperability across all domains and NATO C2 systems.

## DEFENSE INDUSTRY

*"To have the necessary capabilities, the Alliance requires a strong and capable defence industry, with resilient supply chains." - Vilnius Communiqué<sup>8</sup>*

Russia's war in Ukraine revealed the critical state of NATO's defense industrial base, as allies seek to supply Ukraine with **munitions and replenish their stocks**. At Vilnius, allies **urged** the removal of barriers to defense trade and investment among themselves to bolster resiliency. The **Defence Production Action Plan** (DPAP) was unveiled, "leveraging the Alliance's role as a convener, standard-setter, requirement setter and aggregator, and delivery enabler." Highlighted DPAP **priority areas** include aggregating demand across allies to accelerate joint procurement, **increasing production capacity**, and enhancing allied interoperability.

Varying progress has been evident in demand aggregation, interoperability, and procurement coordination and collaboration. Since July 2023, the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) has awarded contracts for **munitions**, joint procurement of **Patriot missiles**, and **artillery shells**. In addition, allies have improved multinational capability cooperation, evident in NATO's MRTT-C air fleet achieving **initial operational capability**. As Figure 4 shows, traditional European producers have increased trade within Europe, but Poland's all-source importation strategy has significantly boosted arms trade for the continent.

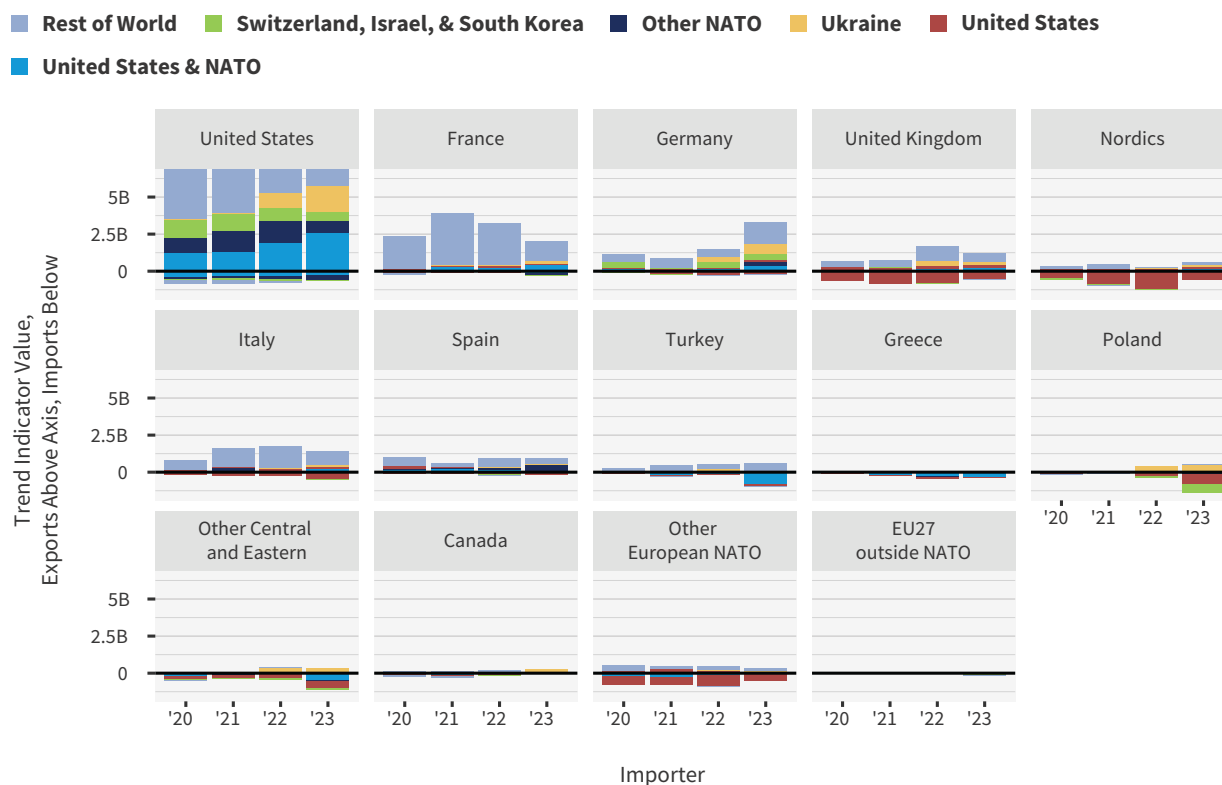
Synchronization efforts between the European Union and NATO could enhance NATO deterrence and defense, should such efforts be pursued. The European Union has **allocated** over €500 million (\$544 million) to ramp up ammunition production and has provided aid to Ukraine through the **European Peace Facility**. Additionally, its first ever **Defense Industrial Strategy** (EDIS) was released this year, with the aim to boost capacity and intra-European collaboration. While some have seen EDIS as in competition with DPAP on standard setting, officials **affirm** that they are not in competition with each other. The European Union and NATO share the goal of increasing readiness, making enhanced coordination between them essential to avoid duplication.

Unsurprisingly, significant defense industrial production challenges remain. Despite clear demand signals, barriers inhibiting production acceleration and NATO-EU tensions persist. Orders form only one input in the production equation, and **delivery delays** fail to convert into weapons stocks in reliable timeframes. Figure 4 shows incremental progress but demonstrates that longstanding pathologies

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<sup>8</sup> The Madrid Declaration did not provide detail on NATO allies commitments to strengthen their defense industry. This came one year later in the Vilnius Summit Communiqué.

Figure 4: NATO and EU Member Major Weapon Systems Trade by Partner Nation, 2000–2023



Note: The data set does not account for joint programs, and thus the lead country receives exclusive credit for any trade. U.S. trade with the rest of the world is only partially shown due to space limitations.

Source: “SIPRI Arms Transfers Database,” SIPRI, May 2024, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>; and CSIS analysis.




hobbling European production are not easily overcome. To ensure NATO readiness, the United States should prioritize multilateral munitions production with member states over bilateral efforts. The European Union’s anticipated increased role raises NATO concerns, but it could positively transform the transatlantic defense industrial base, contingent on EU funding capacity. To effectively leverage NATO collective investments and build production capacity, the alliance would benefit from greater defense industrial integration and consolidation.

## DEFENSE CAPABILITIES

*“Investing in our defence and key capabilities is essential.” – Madrid Summit Declaration*

NATO’s cumulative capabilities far exceed Russia’s—even excluding the United States. This is shown below in Table 2, which uses two examples of critical capabilities to make the comparison. Two years of war in Ukraine have taken their toll on Russia’s armed forces, as its fleet of active main battle tanks has **diminished** by 41 percent since 2022 and active personnel have fallen by nearly 20 percent despite partial national mobilization. Moreover, non-U.S. NATO can field more modern equipment than Russia.

Table 2: Russia vs. Non-U.S. NATO Capabilities Comparison

Capabilities	Non-U.S. NATO (2022)	Russia (2022)	Non-U.S. NATO (2024)	Russia (2024)
 Active-Duty Personnel	1,797,760	900,000	1,891,635	1,100,000
 Combat Capable Aircraft	2,433	1,391	2,429	1,377
 Main Battle Tanks	7,028	3,417	6,652	2,000

Note: This analysis uses the *Military Balance* definition of combat capable aircraft. Main battle tanks includes ASLT vehicles.  
Source: Author analysis based on data derived from International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Military Balance 2024* (London: IISS, 2024); and IISS, *Military Balance 2022* (London: IISS, 2022).

Approximately 71 percent of non-U.S. NATO’s combat aircraft fleet was produced or modernized after 1990, compared to 53 percent of Russia’s inventory.<sup>9</sup>

However, this advantage does not necessarily translate to the battlefield. NATO faces significant capability gaps and readiness challenges which undermine conventional deterrence. Allies may have more advanced combat aircraft, but they have struggled with magazine depth. During NATO’s 2011 air operations in Libya, non-U.S. NATO members began running out of precision munitions within a month—and this was a comparatively minor operation compared to defending the Baltics.

NATO’s issues go beyond airpower. According to a **study by the International Institute for Strategic Studies**, the number of combat battalions, in-service main battle tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, armored reconnaissance vehicles, and self-propelled artillery in European armies has remained static or fallen between 2014 and 2023. More broadly, European nations are carrying significant gaps in **naval forces, air enablers, air defense**, and “**battle-decisive ammunition**” (artillery munitions and missiles). Any major combat operation in Europe would rely on U.S. forces to make up for European **shortfalls** in the land, maritime, and air forces required to deliver a range of warfighting missions. These issues have not yet been addressed by the significant increases in defense investment by NATO allies since 2014. NATO allies clearly face an important conversion challenge in translating their wealth into combat capabilities.

RESILIENCE

“Resilience is a national responsibility and a collective commitment.” – Madrid Summit Declaration

Resilience—incorporating military capacity, civil preparedness, and emergency planning—was NATO’s first line of **defense** against the Soviet Union. The same is true again today. Since Madrid, allies

9 Derived from inventory data from the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ *Military Balance 2024* with assessments on equipment age sourced from Janes Defence’s *Equipment Data*. See International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Military Balance 2024* (London: IISS, 2024), Chapter Three: Europe (54-157, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2024.2298591>) and Chapter Four: Russia and Eurasia (158-217, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2024.2298592>).

have launched several new initiatives to enhance resilience. In October 2022, NATO **established** a Resilience Committee which **met** twice prior to Vilnius. In March 2023, the NATO-EU Task Force on the Resilience of Critical Infrastructure was **established** to examine four key sectors: energy, transport, digital infrastructure, and space. Its final report in June 2023 **recommended** 14 actions to leverage NATO-EU cooperation on critical infrastructure. This was picked up at the Vilnius Summit in July, when NATO **launched** a new Maritime Centre for the Security of Critical Underwater Infrastructure within NATO's Allied Maritime Command. The summit **communiqué** also emphasized societal resilience, health systems, supply chains, and **energy security**. Allies also agreed to resilience objectives and a new baseline for allied resilience planning—which remains a **national** responsibility, guided by NATO authorities.

Resilience is a complex issue that demands persistence, investment, and cooperation, requiring a more coordinated and collective **approach**. Building on progress to date, NATO's Resilience Committee should consider new ideas such as a NATO resilience fund, a resilience advisory group, and a NATO-wide Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) to identify key resilience risks. The European Union's renewed focus on **resilience** and the unique levers it possesses—from financial **instruments** to regulatory powers—make it well placed to act boldly, in continued close cooperation with NATO. These efforts also boost allies' responses to generational challenges in NATO's Strategic Concept, such as green energy and the digital transition.

Enhancing military resilience through NATO is not enough; each ally must confront the **societal challenge** of war preparedness based on its own strategic culture. New allies Finland and Sweden offer a new wave of expertise based on their advanced approaches to whole-of-society resilience and civil preparedness. Above all, NATO allies must find the “**will to fight**,” which—as Ukraine has shown—remains the foundation of defense.

### *Is NATO Ready for War?*

The detailed assessments above are summarized in Table 3 and discussed below. A simple rating of “on track” or “off track” is used because the commitments made by NATO allies in Madrid were not scheduled for completion in Washington. As one **analysis** put it: “the alliance's journey toward stronger defense and deterrence has only just begun.”<sup>10</sup>

What does this assessment tell us about NATO's readiness for war? The answer to this question depends on the kind of war that emerges from any crisis. It seems clear that NATO is **ready** to “fight tonight.” The **transition** to the DDA and the regional plans adopted in Vilnius have driven a step change in the scale of NATO's forces which are combat ready, deployed forward, and under SACEUR's direct command.

Expanding to eight EFP missions and reinforcing air and maritime presence has empowered NATO to swiftly assemble a significant fighting force along the eastern front in crises, fostering a cultural shift among allies.<sup>11</sup>

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10 For example, the integration of Finland and Sweden has started strongly, but it will take more time to embed them in the command structure and a generation before Finnish and Swedish personnel think “NATO first.” Likewise, not every rating below is cut and dry. While enhancements to forward defense are on track to meet the Madrid language, the question of “where and when” brigade-size forces are required is open to debate. Similarly, any assessment of progress in generating the forces required by the NATO force model can only go so far without classified data.

11 For example, over 10,000 soldiers in the British army have now spent significant time in Estonia, training with allies and getting to know the terrain. Germany's leadership of EFP Lithuania has led to a national debate about the size of the Bundeswehr and its first permanent deployment abroad. The U.S. leadership of EFP Poland has enabled a transformation of its presence and investment there. Sweden has agreed to base a combat



Table 3: Assessing NATO's Readiness for War

Madrid Commitment	Madrid Declaration Language (July 2022)	On or off track?	Assessment
Defense spending	"We reaffirm our commitment to the Defence Investment Pledge in its entirety. We will build on that pledge and decide next year on subsequent commitments beyond 2024."	Off track	Only 18 allies will meet the Defense Investment Pledge of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense. However, large increases by European allies since Madrid mean that the average spending by NATO Europe will collectively meet 2 percent this year. Allies must consider bolder spending targets, what capabilities they invest in, and spending more together.
Forward defense forces	"Allies have committed to deploy additional robust in-place combat-ready forces on our eastern flank, to be scaled up from the existing battle groups to brigade-size units where and when required . . . [including] establishing division-level structures."	On track	Significant progress has been made by allies to strengthen NATO's forward presence since Madrid. All eight EFP missions have exercised at battlegroup level, four have tested brigade reinforcement, and two have credible plans to sustain a permanent brigade-size force deployed forward. Maritime and air forward presence has been strengthened, while eastern allies have boosted national defenses and division-level structures. However, any rating depends on one's view of "where and when" brigade-size forces are required. Whether NATO's forward presence is sufficient to deter Russia remains an open question.
NATO force model	"We welcome the initial offers by Allies to NATO's new force model, which will strengthen and modernise the NATO Force Structure and will resource our new generation of military plans."	On track	According to open-source data, the transition to NATO's new force model is on track. However, force generation and sustainment will be difficult due to readiness challenges and the complexity of transferring authority from national to NATO commanders. Nor is there any guarantee that the forces allies will make available to the NFM will be those required by the regional plans.
Command structure	"Allies have committed to . . . enhanced command and control."	On track	NATO is modernizing its C2 structures to meet the demands of the regional plans and integrating Finland and Sweden. Significant progress has been made developing the JFCNF, which commanded Exercise Steadfast Defender for one month this year. Challenges remain, including upscaling the JFCNF, fully integrating Finland and Sweden, and developing enough capacity lower in the command chain.
Integration of new members	"We reaffirm our commitment to NATO's Open Door Policy. Today, we have decided to invite Finland and Sweden to become members of NATO and agreed to sign the Accession Protocols."	On track	Notwithstanding the political dramas, the integration of Finland and Sweden into NATO has been seamless—thanks to their history of close cooperation. However, several challenges remain, including updating NATO's command structure and regional plans to incorporate both nations.

Exercise program	"We will enhance our collective defense exercises to be prepared for high intensity and multi-domain operations and ensure reinforcement of any ally on short notice"	On track	NATO has significantly delivered in its exercise program since Madrid to refocus on collective defense and deliver the DDA. The recent exercise Steadfast Defender was the largest NATO exercise since the Cold War, featuring 90,000 personnel from all allies across all domains.
Defense industry	"To have the necessary capabilities, the Alliance requires a strong and capable defence industry, with resilient supply chains."*	Off track	Progress varies among demand aggregation, interoperability, and procurement coordination. Despite clear demand signals, problems persist, including production acceleration barriers, delivery delays, and NATO-EU coordination.
Defense capabilities	"Investing in our defence and key capabilities is essential."	Off track	On paper, NATO outguns Russia several times over. However, European allies face a significant conversion challenge in translating their wealth and power into combat capabilities. NATO has a range of capability gaps and lacks combat power and mass—problems which have not yet been resolved by the significant defense investment increases.
Resilience	"Resilience is a national responsibility and a collective commitment."	Off track	Since Madrid, NATO has developed new tools to promote resilience among allies and worked with the European Union on critical infrastructure. However, this effort is just beginning. Resilience, crucial during the Cold War, remains NATO's first line of defense—vital for defense industry, supply chains, and logistics. Above all, NATO allies must find the "will to fight," such as has been demonstrated by Ukraine.

Note: \*Language taken from the 2023 Vilnius Summit Communiqué. See the Defense Industry section for more details.

Source: Author's analysis.

Meanwhile, NATO's C2 has evolved quickly and demonstrated readiness through large-scale exercises. The NFM has led to a revolution in apportioning high-readiness national forces to NATO at a scale 10 times greater than **before**. Above all, NATO has successfully integrated Finland and Sweden, adding significant air, naval, and land combat power and removing any uncertainty over their contribution to an Article 5 scenario.

However, a closer look at the longer-term measures agreed upon in Madrid reveals a slightly different question: NATO might be ready for war, but is it ready for protracted war?<sup>12</sup> Any permutation of a serious Russia-NATO conflict that does not end quickly will become a clash of not just armies, but societies. This becomes a **competition** in resilience and preparedness, industrial capacity and supply chains, magazine depth, logistics, mass, resources, and especially the "will to fight." The halting progress and ongoing challenges to increase defense spending, transform defense industrial capacity, address critical capability gaps, and bolster national resilience—all required to strengthen deterrence and defense—must be acknowledged, addressed, and overcome. As SACEUR Cavoli recently **clarified**, the key question for NATO is not about Russian **reconstitution** per se, but relative to the alliance's own

battalion in Latvia—another first. The three Baltic states have deepened their cooperation on national defense.

12 A recent inquiry by the UK Parliament—titled "Ready for War?"—reached similar conclusions, as it also found: "There is no easy answer to these problems." See House of Commons Defense Committee, *Ready for War?* (London: House of Commons, February 2024), <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43178/documents/214880/default/>.

deterrence and defense reconstitution. As Clausewitz **reminds** us in his “two wrestlers” metaphor, all strategy is dynamic and relative.

In reconstituting their forces, NATO allies face the **perennial challenge** of balancing the “**iron triangle**” of trade-offs between readiness, modernization, and force structure. For NATO, this might be adjusted as shown in Figure 5. In essence, allies must balance short-term force increases (“fight tonight”) and long-term modernization efforts (“fight tomorrow”), all while preparing for protraction. For example, compare Poland’s **efforts** to soon field the biggest army in Europe with the United Kingdom’s **focus** on becoming a “Science and Tech Superpower” by 2030. This trade-off is neither new nor binary, but the nature of the Russian threat makes it critical. The answer will depend on the judgment of NATO allies as to when Russia might be able and willing to attack. The diverse range of assessments and **inherent uncertainty** of this task make it challenging, but NATO’s war readiness will depend on the type of conflict that arises. It seems clear that NATO is **ready** to “fight tonight.”

Figure 5: The “Iron Triangle” of Trade-Offs for NATO’s Deterrence and Defense



Source: Based on author’s analysis. For the “iron triangle” concept, see Frank Hoffman, “Scraping Rust from the Iron Triangle: Why the Pentagon Should Invest in Capability,” War on the Rocks, February 9, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/scraping-rust-iron-triangle/>.

A final question raised by this analysis is the paradigm within which NATO allies are planning to meet their Madrid commitments. The 2022 Strategic Concept put forward defense back on NATO’s agenda, but for all its qualities, allied forward presence is “**still a tripwire**.”<sup>13</sup> Even if the Madrid commitments were fulfilled completely, NATO’s forward presence would likely still fall short of the **denial** standard required to make a Russian *fait accompli* untenable.<sup>14</sup> The strategy would then be “expel, not repel,” when **the reverse** is far preferable. The alliance would be placing all of its eggs in the basket of nuclear deterrence, with all the catastrophic associated risks.

<sup>13</sup> NATO’s continued de facto compliance with the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act may be acting as an important constraint here. Many consider the act a “dead letter” but in practice allies still respect many of its principles. For example, NATO’s forward defense ground forces are kept below the brigade level which Russia has long equated to the “substantial combat forces” both committed not to deploy forward in 1997.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Richard D. Hooker’s fictional account of the failure of NATO’s conventional “tripwire” deterrent.

As NATO leaders gather in Washington this summer, they should celebrate their significant progress in fulfilling the commitments made in Madrid to bolster allied deterrence and defense. They should also push for improvements in key areas underpinning NATO's readiness for a protracted war: defense spending, industrial capacity, critical capability gaps, and national resilience. Furthermore, they should reconsider whether the level of ambition they set in Madrid is high enough. In the Cold War, NATO's strategy **rested** just as much on a robust forward defense "shield" as it did on its "sword" of nuclear deterrence. Times have changed, but not that much. *Si vis pacem, para bellum.* ■

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