

Reconfiguring Europe's Forward Presence: Designing a Credible Eastern Flank Posture Amid Reduced U.S. Military Commitment

Executive Summary

This article assesses how NATO's former and current Eastern Flank deterrence and force posture is conceptualised at the moment and evaluates how a U.S.-withdrawal might impact operational credibility towards Russia. NATO's deterrence and defence posture on the Eastern Flank has shifted from a tripwire-based punishment model to a forward-defence denial strategy. This article proceeds in three steps: First, it outlines Russia's expanding military threat and the European strategic deficits. Second, it analyses NATO's posture reforms. Finally, it identifies the resulting European capability gaps. The paper recommends that European governments adopt planning assumptions that require autonomous deployment, sustainment, and reinforcement of heavy forces on the Eastern Flank, including prepositioned stocks, resilient logistics, and layered air defence. It further argues that Europe must build political and operational mechanisms capable of substituting for U.S. contributions to NATO's response forces—either by expanding European inputs to the New Force Model or by leveraging coalitions such as the Joint Expeditionary Force or Multinational Coalition Force—Ukraine—to maintain credible deterrence under conditions of reduced American support.

1. Geopolitical Situation

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has sharpened concerns about the potential involvement of NATO and European Union member states in a broader conflict on EU territory. In the security environment that has emerged since 2014, and more acutely over the past few years, the EU struggled to translate its own strategic goals into sustained political actions. The EU lacks a Grand Strategy that defines long-term political and military ends. This is particularly evident considering Russia's offensive capabilities and coercive strategy. Russia seeks to fundamentally reshape Euro-Atlantic security by reasserting control over neighbouring states and establishing spheres of influence that constrain NATO's political and military reach.

To advance these strategic objectives, Russia employs a coordinated mix of military and non-military means along Europe's Eastern Flank. Despite attrition in Ukraine, Russia is restructuring its armed forces, for example, through its 44th Army Corps in Karelia near the Finnish border, and plans to expand its forces on a division level. The Northern Fleet underscores Russia's military strength by carrying a significant share of its strategic missile capability, including the Yasen-M nuclear-powered submarines, posing a potential naval threat to Europe in terms of long-range conventional deep strike (IISS, 2025). European intelligence services assess that NATO is likely to face a Soviet-style mass army within the next decade whose numerical strength, firepower, and reserves would constitute a serious threat despite its technological inferiority to Allied forces (Barry et al., 2025).

While the Russian threat towards Europe is intensifying, Europe is faced with decreasing US-provided security guarantees. According to estimates by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, European countries would need to make substantial additional investments, estimated at around USD 1 trillion, beyond their current military modernisation and force expansion, to offset the conventional capabilities currently provided by the U.S. in Europe (Barry et al., 2025). Currently, the European defence landscape is fragmented and core capabilities, including ISR, long-range strike and integrated air and missile defence, remain insufficient or dependent on U.S. systems. Therefore, the EU and its member states have to transform from security consumers to security providers for their own defence architecture. The development of a European Grand Strategy is no longer an optional aspiration, but an operational requirement.

2. NATO's evolving Deterrence and Force Posture on the Eastern Flank

Prior to 2022, NATO's force posture on the Eastern Flank was based on the so-called tripwire deterrent. In the event of an armed attack, NATO's forward units would work as a commitment and safeguard the respective contributing nation's involvement in a collective Article 5- response (Guerout & Romar, 2024). At its core, this tripwire-force posture consisted of three components: Four battalion-sized forward battle groups (MNB) (approx. 1.000 personnel each) in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP). To equally reassure Southern European nations like Bulgaria, Romania or Slovakia, the Tailored Forward Presence (TFP) was mandated with a brigade-sized component

battlegroup. These were backed by the so-called NATO Response Force (NRF) – a 40.000 troops-strong follow-on forces concept, with the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) at its heart, comprising 5.000 personnel on standby, but deployable on short-notice (Guerout & Romar, 2024; NATO, 2026). With these force packages, the Alliance sought to establish a tripwire-deterrent. But what it signifies politically does not mirror operational realities.

The tripwire idea embodies the deterrence-by-punishment strategy. It is defined by how it dissuades the challenger – by punishing in the (immediate) aftermath of a taken action: “[the] strategy of deterrence by punishment involves threatening an opponent that retaliation will follow any aggression” (Bojang & Jacobs, 2019, 16). Therefore, and in contrast to deterrence by denial (see paragraphs below), punishment does *not* signal to the opponent that he won’t achieve his goals per se. Yet, the costs for doing so will be increased in a way that makes the undertaking a zero-sum game from the onset.

This tripwire posture is adequate to signal responsiveness and reassure, but not substantial enough to successfully defend against armed aggression. This was demonstrated in numerous wargames conducted by the RAND Corporation between 2014 and 2015, in which a successful defence effort could not be mounted, with the maximum time Russian forces needed to reach the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga being 60 hours. Strategically, these scenarios leave battlegroups annihilated or cut off from support, and Baltic territory occupied. NATO, then, would need to decide on escalating (potentially nuclear), attempting a counter-offensive to liberate the Baltics or accept defeat (Johnson & Shlapak, 2016; Cheravitch et al., 2021).

NATO’s deterrence strategy changed in response to Russia’s full-out invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This shift was marked as one from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial. “Deterrence by denial strategies seek to deter an action by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed, thus denying a potential aggressor confidence in attaining its objectives” (Mazarr, 2018, 2). Meaning, that here emphasis is put on denying gains to the opponent.

Two factors contributed to the political shift in deterrence strategy: the initial Russian territorial gains in Ukraine (which were larger than the Baltic states themselves), and the massacres of Bucha and Irpin, which made clear that Russian occupation of NATO territory must be prevented. This new denial calculus also marked the operational departure from the

tripwire towards forward defence — a concept that implies pushing back enemy invading forces right at the border (Kepe, 2024).

Defending forward, by design, demands a more robust force effort. To this end, NATO adopted multiple measures. First, the existing EFP battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland were decided to be scaled up to brigade size until 2026. Each battlegroup's combat strength will then be up to 5.000 troops. Given the rotational presence of contributing nations, elements stationed in their home country are combat-ready on short notice- thanks to the permanent pre-positioning of military equipment on the Eastern Flank. Furthermore, four additional MNBs have been established on the Southeastern Flank of Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania (Calcagno & Marrone, 2024, 1-2). An overhauled follow-on forces concept further complements the modified battlegroups. At the Madrid summit 2022, the Allies endorsed the replacement of the NRF with the so-called 'New Force model' (NFM). It expects a total of 800.000 NATO troops to be deployable within ten to 180 days. However, the timing intervals and force quantities have been fundamentally revised from the NRF. Instead of the VJTF's 5.000 troop component, the NFM works with a tier-class system. Tier One includes a 100.000 troop capacity that is combat-ready within the first ten days of a crisis. In these 100.000 included is the newly founded Allied Reaction Force (ARF) (successor to the VJTF), containing 40.000 units on short notice. Another 200.000 forces are projected for Tier Two in between ten and thirty days. Tier Three, lastly, ranging from thirty to 180 days, provides another 500.000 troops. The NFM became fully operational in 2025 (Calcagno & Marrone, 2024, 1-2; Major & Swistek, 2022, 4; Fleischer & Vieth, 2024).

At the NATO Vilnius summit in 2023, a new generation of regional defence plans was agreed upon, replacing older ones from 2016. Overall, three area-specific plans were created. One for the Atlantic and High North, Central Europe and the Baltics, as well as the Southern Flank. These regional plans lay out each unit's individual readiness level, tactical area of responsibility and assign specific capabilities to either locations or missions (NATO, 2023).

All of these measures serve for the forward-defence strategy and to deny any aggressor potential gains on the battlefield (Kepe, 2024).

3. Impact of U.S. Force Reduction on European Defence and Eastern Flank

With President Trump's return to the White House in 2025, the United States established a transactional policy towards Europe that deemphasises the American leadership role in NATO and envisions rebalancing towards the Indo-Pacific theatre. Although the possibility of potential US-troop withdrawals from Europe was floating in European capitals as early as February 2025, when announced by Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference, the schedule and scope of the withdrawal were expected to be communicated in the U.S.'s Global Posture Review (Lunday, 2025; Boes, 2025). This document, which was originally intended for release in Fall 2025, did not get published until the time of writing in June 2026. However, some official announcements made in the meantime give a hint at the prospective scope.

In the summer of 2025, European heads of state were already aware of the upcoming withdrawals. Back then, officials estimated the U.S. may redeploy about 30 percent of capabilities from Europe back elsewhere (Bashchenko, 2025). The Polish defence minister drew public attention in the Summer of 2025, when he explained that American troop cuts will be based on each member's financial contribution to NATO (Erling, 2025). In October 2025, the U.S. Army withdrew about 1.000 troops from Romania, equating to around 50% of all U.S. forces present in the country. Despite official statements stressing this to be a posture-adaptation, many observers interpreted it as the prelude to a broader withdrawal (Costita & Furlong, 2025). Fitting into this timeline was Germany's request to buy approximately 400 Tomahawk cruise missiles from the U.S. and the associated Typhon launcher in the summer of 2025 (Greet, 2025; Speer, 2025). These launchers and munitions were originally intended to be deployed with the U.S. Army's Multi Domain Task Force (MDTF), as agreed between Germany and the United States in 2024. The MDTF was envisioned as an interim Deep-Precision strike capability until Europeans could field their own capacities. In May 2026, the Pentagon officially cancelled the planned deployment of the unit, supposed to bring Tomahawks, SM-6 semi-ballistic missiles, and hypersonic glide vehicles to the MDTF (Newdick, 2025). In addition, Germany's request to buy the estimated 400 Tomahawks has been

rejected, citing strategic stability concerns with Russia and its dwindling stockpiles (Serozhina, 2026). The redeployment of soldiers previously stationed in Romania and the cancellation of the MDTF concerned force elements that were not directly reported to NATO's NFM, but they evidence a new wind of change.

Similarly, in May 2026, and as touched upon in Chapter 2, the Pentagon announced not to deploy the 2nd Armoured Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Cavalry Division. This brigade was supposed to replace a previously stationed mechanised brigade that spearheaded the U.S. -led multinational battlegroup in Poland as part of NATO's forward presence (Britzkey, 2026). A few days later, War Minister Pete Hegseth reversed the decision and agreed to deploy the brigade to Poland.

Despite relief in the Alliance (Jack & Wälde, 2026), it became clear that U.S. forward forces on NATO's Eastern Flank are perceived to be subject to Washington's bargaining leverage. By the end of May 2026, reports surfaced that the Pentagon – behind closed doors at NATO - sought to withdraw additional capabilities, such as destroyers, submarines, drones, strategic bombers, and fighter aircraft. Although timelines and quantities were again not communicated, the scope of the withdrawal is said to depend on Europe's ability to fill these gaps. The concern over further US redeployments is additionally exacerbated by an announcement by the Trump administration that the pool of U.S. forces reported into NATO's New Force Model Tier-system is going to shrink prospectively (Gray et al., 2026).

Therefore, the U.S. withdrawal impacts NATO's Eastern Flank posture in three ways: first, it makes those multinational battlegroups that have a U.S. component to them politically more unreliable. Second, it constrains the Alliance's follow-on forces' responsiveness and capacity; third, it drains qualitative military capabilities available to NATO and forces the Europeans to rudimentarily compensate for these gaps. The next section will examine the resulting capability-gap more closely.

4. Capability Gaps and Operational Requirements

A worthwhile indicator to approximate future capability-burden sharing is the new NATO defence spending targets adopted at the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague. European defence spending has risen significantly. In fact, in nominal terms, it is already approximately 50% higher in 2025 than it was in 2022 (IISS, 2025).

The corresponding demand in capability output is massive. In June 2025, Allies pledged binding capability targets negotiated on a tailored basis for each member state (Ruitenberg, 2025). Some leaks on NATO's overall baseline needs, called the Minimum Capability Requirements (MCR) hint at a massive increase as derived from the new regional defence plans. For example, compared to the 2021 targets, the MCR's demand increased from 81 Brigades, to 131. The command and control elements for large manoeuvre formations are to be scaled up from 6 to 15 Warfighting Corps Headquarters and 38 Division command posts instead of the previous 24. Ground-based Air Defence is expected to surge from 293 to 1147 units. Germany alone is expected to contribute 9.28% to the overall surge – equating to around five to six Army brigades, on top of its existing nine, for example (Jungholt, 2024).

For European NATO states this increase is exponential, as they not only have to live up to the new 30 percent average surge across all NATO-capabilities, but will have to compensate for a potential withdrawal of another 30 percent the US is currently contributing. The core problem remains that, under current conditions, Europe lacks the capabilities to fight and sustain a high-intensity conflict at the Eastern Flank without substantial U.S. support. The gap between current capabilities and the requirement for a forward presence is most visible in critical enablers, which include ISR, satellite capabilities, long-range strike assets, and military mobility.

On the Eastern Flank, ISR is particularly critical because hostile force movement must be detected, tracked and distinguished across a wide potential battlespace where Russia is likely to use deception, dispersion, and rapid concentration of force. Europe operates a considerably smaller fleet of crewed ISR aircraft than the U.S., with 36 such aircraft compared to at least 80 in U.S. service. Dedicated aircraft suited for Signal Intelligence make up only one-third of those operated by the U.S. Europe's structural challenges in developing its own sovereign reconnaissance assets are underlined by the general stagnation of European Medium-altitude long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicle projects (IISS, 2025).

Similar dependencies are evident in Europe's military space capabilities. Capabilities that should be prioritised in order to achieve independence include space situational awareness, military reconnaissance, and early missile warning (Süß, 2025). Even though the EU currently operates two of its own dual-use satellite networks, Copernicus for Earth observation and Galileo for navigation, launch capabilities remain dependent on the U.S. The EU has established the EU Space Surveillance and Tracking Forum for sharing data, but it

remains dependent on data from the U.S. military. Satellite imagery enables secure and precise reconnaissance and is a crucial component in modern warfare. The U.S. currently operates the largest number of ISR satellites, which is particularly important for maintaining a high revisit rate. As this rate remains low in the EU, the creation of a comprehensive situational picture is hindered (Süß, 2025).

Military mobility is another key area to safeguard adequate deterrence capability. In contingencies, the current force posture would require moving troops and materiel over a distance of 1,000 kilometres. In addition to troops, armoured vehicles, ammunition, and other logistical support would also need to be transported. Incompatibilities in Eastern Europe's railway gauges and load-bearing limitations of bridges exemplify Europe's military mobility fragmentation (Budginaite-Froehly, 2024). In Germany alone, 4,000 bridges requiring repair have been identified (IISS, 2025). With U.S. forces and associated capabilities being reduced, Europe must independently field more heavy units and equipment on the Eastern Flank to sustain a high-intensity conflict. This is hampered by a shortage of military bridging systems, particularly the lack of ferry and pontoon systems used to cross larger water obstacles. Many of the outdated systems have a military load classification (MLC) MLC50 or MLC60, whereas a minimum MLC80 is required to carry heavier vehicles to allow the heaviest main battle tanks and heavy equipment transporters, which carry tanks, to safely cross bridging systems (Fish, 2025). A lack of these systems can cause delays and risks during ground manoeuvres. Armoured formations, artillery, and logistics units may be delayed or unable to advance. It slows reinforcement of the Eastern Flank if civilian bridges are damaged or overloaded, while fewer crossing points make troop movements more predictable and vulnerable to enemy attack.

Both national and multinational initiatives have emerged within Europe in order to increase European capabilities. At the EU level, the Readiness Roadmap 2030 seeks to mobilise up to EUR 800 billion to facilitate capability development. Still, current approaches fail to ensure that national procurement and plans form fully cohesive, interoperable military planning. Designing adequate military means for the right political ends requires a shift from national solutions to an integrated, European-led structure that can demonstrate credible deterrence, capable of substituting for U.S. contributions to NATO.

5. Policy Recommendations

A. Face it: Europe May Have to Fight Contingencies Alone.

European capitals should assume that U.S. military support may be delayed or limited. A European grand strategy must therefore include a sole-continental deployment and sustainment of heavy forces, logistics, and command and control structures. This should cover prepositioned stocks, reinforcement corridors, air defence, and the ability to sustain combat power either before a possible U.S. support arrives or – if necessary, fight contingencies self-reliantly.

B. Find Adequate Operational and Political Frameworks to Substitute for U.S. voids in NATO's Reaction Forces

To ensure redundancy, European capitals should brace for a potential U.S. withdrawal in NATO's most important spearhead forces (i.e. multinational battlegroups, or the ARF). Filling these gaps can either be done by a European-NATO coalition that reports more units to NATO's follow-on force-pools, or shifting readiness levels of already contributed components. A second option would be to utilise force frameworks outside of NATO. Adequate ways to do so may be coalition-led contingents such as the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, the France- UK steered Coalition's Multinational Force–Ukraine (MNF-U), which established its strategic joint command headquarters in Fort Mont Valerien, Paris, in late 2025. Another way would be to exploit the EU's rapid deployment capacity (whose strength is up to one brigade) and command it with the help of NATO's Supreme Allied Headquarters Europe's infrastructure (i.e. via the Berlin-Plus arrangement). Each way brings different associated trade-offs, but could substitute for a lack of U.S. commitment fairly quickly.

C. Develop Redundant European Force-Enabler Capacities

NATO, the EU and their member states should incentivise the growth of European capabilities, particularly force multipliers and enablers. A good-practice example in doing so can be found in commercial space companies that can close critical capability gaps in the short-term, particularly in ISR, earth observation, and data transmission. Firms such as Finnish ICEYE illustrate how commercially available capabilities can be

integrated into military operations. To make this viable, governments should commit to long-term contracts and simplify procurement procedures.

D. Reduce Duplication in EU and NATO Capability Planning and Procurement

Currently, both NATO and the EU provide dual-member states with different planning and procurement mechanisms. The EU has the Capability Development Plan and NATO has the Defence Planning Process. Both instruct their members on the respective institutional level of ambition. Potential planning divergencies risk tearing dual-member states in two contrasting directions rather than harmonising common needs. Additionally, the EU fosters its own multilateral procurement projects through the European Defence Agency. NATO follows a similar track with its NATO Support and Procurement Agency. Though both support their respective member states in joint arms acquisition, they still do not work integrated but rather fragmented across isolated projects. Merging both institutions' capacities is essential though, to instruct any meaningful joint capability surge for the European continent.

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