

Croatia Wants to Support NATO Air Defense Operations—the U.S. Should Assist This Strategic Partner in Doing So

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S. should support Croatia—a clear-eyed ally that recognizes the Russian threat—as it seeks to strengthen its contribution to NATO.

Croatia's strategic location and its desire to increase defense investments make it a near-ideal player in Europe's air defense structure.

The Administration should facilitate Croatia's purchase of U.S. fourth-generation fighter aircraft, which will help bolster NATO's collective defense capabilities.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was formed in 1949, at the beginning of the Cold War in response to an aggressive and expansionist Soviet Union. After standing together for 41 years, the Alliance witnessed the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1990. In the aftermath, the Alliance basked in the glow of a peace that lasted more than 20 years. Until recently, many European nations had slashed their defense spending, resulting in a loss of real capabilities. Now, at the age of 70 and faced with a revanchist Russia, NATO is again re-orienting itself toward its core mission of territorial defense, and is rebuilding capabilities that atrophied over decades of diminished defense spending.

Within NATO, many of the newest members are leading the way in terms of defense investment. Croatia, which joined the organization in 2009, is looking to increase its defense investments, recapitalize its

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military, and bolster its contribution to the Alliance by revitalizing its fighting force, perhaps most importantly by replacing its fleet of outdated MiG-21 fighter aircraft. Croatia recognizes the threats that Europe faces, as well as the need to strengthen its own contribution toward the collective defense—despite an economy that pales in comparison to well-established NATO member states. There is momentum here, and the Trump Administration should capitalize on it by facilitating Croatia’s purchase of U.S. fourth-generation fighter aircraft, which will help bolster NATO’s collective defense capabilities and strengthen the U.S.–Croatian partnership.

A Resurgent Threat

Lasting peace and stability are sought out by the people of most every nation in the world. The period of peace that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 was long enough to blur the memories of many of the most prosperous nations in Europe. Despite a growing Russian threat, the anemic military budgets, poor readiness levels, and equivocal public statements of some of NATO’s oldest member states are troubling. The threat from Russia, however, remains acute: From the Arctic to the Baltics, Ukraine, the South Caucasus, and increasingly the Mediterranean Sea, Russia has embarked on a campaign to foment instability in Europe.

Russian activity in the eastern Mediterranean is cause for concern. Russia has fortified its position in Syria, while seeking to bolster its presence in both Egypt and Libya. In March 2019, General Curtis Scaparrotti, the Supreme NATO Commander, testified that

The Kremlin has also demonstrated the ability and political will to deploy its modernized military and expand its operational footprint. Last year we observed a historically high combat maritime presence in the East Mediterranean along with military deployments and demonstrations in Syria.¹

In the Western Balkans, the neighborhood where Croatia resides, Russia seeks to sever the transatlantic bond forged with the Western Balkans by sowing instability. In that region, Russia has sought to inflame pre-existing ethnic, historic, and religious tensions. Russian propaganda magnifies this toxic ethnic and religious messaging, fans public disillusionment with the West as well as institutions inside the Balkan nations, and misinforms the public about Russia’s intentions and interests in the region.²

Many of NATO’s newest member states, including Croatia, are clear-eyed about the threat from Russia and seek to counter this threat through

increases in their defense spending. The United States has a vested interest in peace and stability in the Western Balkans, where Croatia serves as an anchor of stability. Croatia can also play an important role in helping to fill a NATO gap in air capabilities that has only become more acute as Russian aggression has expanded in recent years.

A Need for Additional NATO Air Capabilities

Over the years, the NATO military leadership in Mons, Belgium, has attempted to counter Russian aggression against member states by establishing air-policing missions over the Baltics and Montenegro (2004 and 2018, respectively), and air-surveillance missions over Iceland and the Black Sea region (2013 and 2016, respectively).³ While both missions are indeed complex, air policing requires a network of radars (the Air Surveillance and Control System (ASACS)), effective command and control (C2) and Air Command and Control (Air C2), and a standing Quick Reaction Force of alert fighters that can effectively detect and intercept intruders 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.⁴ An air-surveillance mission like the one currently in place over Iceland requires many of the same resources, but it is more periodic in nature⁵ and levies less taxing demands on NATO partners who provide those resources on a voluntary basis.⁶ The collective weight of those four ongoing missions would have been easily shouldered during the height of the Cold War when defense budgets and readiness levels were very high. However, after years of force-size reductions and ever-decreasing military budgets, the demand of just these four air missions is testing the capacity and capability of the combined NATO air forces that exist today.

The Impact of Low Defense Spending on Air Power

In an effort to stop the slide in readiness, President Donald Trump has encouraged NATO member nations to meet the 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) defense-spending guidelines agreed on at NATO's 2014 Wales Summit. While several nations have since met the goal, or have significantly increased their contributions, progress for some of the oldest members of the Alliance has been slow, and the pledges of several have turned out to be little more than hollow rhetoric. Since 2014, French defense spending has remained flat at 1.82 percent of GDP, the Netherlands now sits at 1.35 percent, Denmark at 1.21 percent, Italy at 1.15 percent, and Germany, with arguably the healthiest economy in Europe, at an abysmal 1.23 percent.⁷ The only way these countries' respective militaries have handled funding

declines of huge magnitudes has been to reduce the size of their fielded forces—which, viewed together, present a troubling picture.

In 1987, the United States had 29 fighter squadrons based in Western Europe alone. Today it has a total of 32 total fighter squadrons on active duty, just six of which are based in Europe. NATO allies have downsized in kind, and Germany is down to five operational Eurofighter squadrons and three operational squadrons of dated Tornado fighter bombers. The mission-capable rate of the Tornado is just 40 percent, which means that only four of every 10 jets are ready to fly a combat mission on any given day. While low, that rate looks stellar when compared to that of the four-plus-generation multi-role Eurofighter. In 2018, just four of the fleet of 128 Eurofighters were combat ready, equating to a 3 percent mission-capable rate.⁸ Since those numbers were released last year, the German government has classified the readiness of its weapons for security reasons,⁹ and, likely to stave off further embarrassment.

Without question, the Luftwaffe would be hard pressed to meet its NATO obligation to provide 82 combat-ready jets for crisis situations.¹⁰ The German government, like several others in the Alliance, has recognized the growing Russian threat,¹¹ yet continues to sustain high levels of domestic spending and has not effectively increased its military budget to turn around the dismal state of its fielded military forces.

The U.S. Should Encourage Croatia's Ambitions

Croatia's desire to expand its role within NATO, coupled with its strategic location, make it a near-ideal player in Europe's air defense structure. Its fighter force is small, but its organization is solid, and the only thing currently holding it back are dated weapons systems. Their MiG-21 is a third-generation fighter that was exceptional in its day, but is now obsolete and incredibly hard to maintain.

After several years of searching, negotiations, and actually budgeting for the transaction, Croatia placed a bid to acquire 12 Israeli F-16 fighters that was accepted in January 2018.¹² That same year, Croatia spent 1.71 percent of its GDP on defense, and the contract with Israel would have moved it markedly closer to, if not beyond, the 2014 Wales defense spending threshold of 2 percent of GDP. The contract contained everything Croatia needed to rapidly field the F-16s, including simulators, training for its pilots and maintenance staff, aircraft weapons, spare parts, ground support equipment, changes in infrastructure, and three years of support, including the presence of Israeli instructors in Croatia.¹³

The first two Israeli F-16s were expected to be delivered to Croatia in 2020, but the deal was ultimately cancelled by the United States in 2018, based on the electronic modifications the Israelis had made to those aircraft. Due to the highly advanced nature of those modifications, that decision was certainly the prerogative of the United States, but it put Croatia back to square one in its search for a new fighter.¹⁴

Croatia certainly needs a new jet to strengthen its own security, and the right deal would allow the country to rapidly expand its contributions to NATO.¹⁵ For that reason alone, the Trump Administration should step in and facilitate Croatia's acquisition of a fourth-generation fighter. Making that happen now will elevate the overall combat capability of the Alliance, and give the U.S. more leverage to push Germany, France, Italy, and other NATO members to meet the intent of the 2014 Wales agreement and start rebuilding NATO's military power.

Moving forward the U.S. should:

- **Continue to press NATO allies to live up to their defense spending commitments.** While the U.S. should acknowledge the recent spending increases by some NATO members, far too few are living up to their commitments. America's leadership role in NATO means continuing to encourage allies to develop a plan to live up to their spending commitments, and to maintain and increase the progress of recent years.
- **Call for the development of a new Strategic Concept.** A NATO Strategic Concept is an official document that outlines the geopolitical and security challenges facing the Alliance, and the strategy that should be adapted to deal with these challenges. The last NATO Strategic Concept was published in 2010, before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the so-called Arab Spring, the migrant crisis, and Russia's intervention in Syria. It is time for the Alliance to update the Strategic Concept for the London Summit in December 2019.
- **Help Croatia find fighter jet alternatives.** The U.S. Department of Defense should actively pursue and offer viable alternatives to the cancelled Croatian-Israeli fighter contract. Once Croatia selects the best of the alternatives, the Defense Department should rapidly move to actualize the sale and transfer of fighter platforms, simulators, spare parts, maintenance equipment, and munitions, and train Croatian fighter pilots and technicians on the new weapons system.

- **Promote the export of battle-tested U.S. defense equipment.** The U.S. should, when appropriate, promote the export of U.S. defense equipment to Croatia. When a foreign government buys American military equipment, it not only receives battle-tested equipment, it also gains a deeper military relationship with the United States.

Conclusion

As the leader in NATO, the United States needs to employ every tool and technique in its arsenal to pressure allies into increasing their fighter fleet capability and readiness numbers. In that vein, the Administration should fuel the spark offered by nations, such as Croatia, that are willing and ready to move on those issues, and support their efforts in every way possible.

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