

# Look to the Seas: Why a Regional Focus in the North and South Strengthens NATO Deterrence

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Pressuring NATO allies to contribute to every mission set is strategically myopic. Distributed responsibilities among NATO members makes the most sense.

European NATO members will need to do more across the board, as the most pressing challenge facing the United States is China in the Indo-Pacific.

NATO's northern members should focus on Baltic Sea and Arctic Ocean security, while the southern members should focus on challenges to their south.

The formal entry of Finland and Sweden into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) over the past two years enhanced alliance security, but it also revealed a strategic myopia: demands that each NATO ally simultaneously contribute to every mission set. Finland and Sweden are already facing pressure to engage across southeastern Europe, the Mediterranean, and even the Indo-Pacific instead of focusing their capabilities where they are most effective—in the High North and the Baltic Sea. Mediterranean NATO states have also been called to act beyond their region in recent years. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO Mediterranean members have resisted calls for them to supply Ukraine with substantial amounts of military aid, preferring for the United States and northern European countries to lead this effort. This preference has not been paired with a redoubled commitment to Mediterranean security.

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Within NATO, the security picture and the most pressing security challenges look different member by member. Russian grey zone warfare is the primary and most persistent security threat to NATO's Nordic and Baltic allies. Simultaneously, NATO's Mediterranean members' primary security challenges lie instead with instability-fueled migration and terrorism augmented by Russian activity. The picture shifts yet again when viewed from Washington, as America confronts an emboldened Beijing attempting to restructure global politics.

Therefore, it is important to align the core security challenges faced by NATO allies with the relevant mission priorities laid out in NATO documents such as the 2022 Strategic Concept and the Regional Defense Plans. As European NATO allies increase defense spending to resource conventional deterrence against Russia, NATO's northern allies are best served by bolstering their security presence and capabilities in the Baltic Sea and Arctic Ocean, while Mediterranean allies should double down on Mediterranean security while seeking to improve stability in the Middle East and Africa.

## Baltic Strategic Planning

**Deterrence for the Baltic States.** Given Russia's underperformance in Ukraine, its ability to conventionally threaten countries with far more effective militaries than Ukraine's (Poland, for example) is limited. As a result, Russia will likely rely on grey zone tactics short of direct military aggression when targeting most NATO member states.

That said, Russia does pose a conventional military threat to three NATO member states, in particular—the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. These three NATO members, while very motivated in terms of defense spending, are too small to deter conventional Russian aggression alone and depend on the rest of the alliance. However, they can and should assist efforts to counter Russian and Chinese grey zone activities in the Baltic, as a united front there reinforces NATO's strategic deterrence. The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO has already provided additional security for the Baltic states, but much more needs to be done to bolster deterrence against Russian adventurism.

**Accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO.** Though only recently NATO members, Finland and Sweden have long focused their national security planning, force structure, and defense spending on securing their near abroad, especially the Baltic Sea, Arctic navigation, and Finland's border with Russia. Their recent accession to NATO improves Baltic security and

will severely complicate matters for Russian military planners for years to come. As a 2024 Finnish foreign and security policy report puts it:

Finland's and Sweden's NATO memberships and the increasingly close bilateral cooperation arrangements between the Nordic countries and the United States strengthens the stability and security in the Baltic Sea region and Northern Europe, reducing the risk of the use of military force in Finland's neighboring areas. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO also helps deepen the cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic countries.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond just Finland and Sweden, America's Nordic NATO allies share deep historical socio-political ties cemented by common neutrality-based approaches taken in the 20th century. Finland illustrated these ties by publishing its 2024 Government Defense Report in English, Finnish, and Swedish. In a natural extension, the Nordic nations' interconnectivity has fostered joint Arctic Council activities,<sup>2</sup> leadership in ad hoc coalitions focused on Baltic security issues,<sup>3</sup> Swedish plans to open a NATO base in northern Finland by 2026,<sup>4</sup> and a NATO Baltic sentry mission this past January.<sup>5</sup>

From multinational NATO exercises<sup>6</sup> to long-standing NORDEFSCO cooperation<sup>7</sup> to bilateral agreements and exercises among the group,<sup>8</sup> the Nordic nations are among the most prepared and interoperable nations in the world. On a practical level, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden outlined a unified "Nordic Warfighting Concept for Joint Air Operations" aimed at achieving the ability "to operate seamlessly together as one force in the Nordic region."<sup>9</sup> On the ground, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden all rely on BAE Systems' Combat Vehicle 90 as their infantry fighting vehicle of choice and are pursuing joint procurement for the next generation of infantry fighting vehicles to guarantee continued interoperability for common regional requirements.<sup>10</sup> Their interoperability and integration across all military domains was further enhanced through planning, hosting, and participating in NATO's Nordic Response 2024 exercise featuring over 20,000 soldiers from 13 allied nations conducting joint operations in Finland, Norway, and Sweden on land, air and sea.<sup>11</sup> Their extensive cooperation has been on display in response to repeated Russian and Chinese grey zone warfare operations in the Baltic Sea over the past year.<sup>12</sup>

**The Role of Germany.** Germany is pivotal to deterring Russian conventional aggression and will need to continue to increase defense spending and realign its force planning to deter Russian aggression, especially against the Baltic states. Germany, with the biggest economy and population among

European NATO members, is uniquely situated to fill the gaps in military capacity that will arise when the United States re-postures forces to the Indo-Pacific. Germany has shown some progress in this effort since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, especially through its \$100 billion special fund for military procurement and modernization and as the second-biggest contributor of military aid to Ukraine after the United States. However, the additional funding provided by this one-time budget mechanism will run out by 2027, and Germany will need major defense spending increases just to remain above 2 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP), even though it needs to be well beyond this minimum amount, moving toward 3 percent of GDP on defense spending.

Germany is planning to permanently station an armored brigade in Lithuania beginning in 2027, a welcome development the United Kingdom and Spain should consider emulating in Estonia and Latvia—especially as the rotational Canadian presence in Latvia is likely to end sometime this decade and because the American rotational presence in these countries may be greatly reduced or end altogether if major security crises arise in the Indo-Pacific or Middle East.

## Mediterranean Strategic Planning

**Mediterranean Security.** France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain have been lukewarm supporters of military aid to Ukraine, preferring other countries to take the lead. To a certain extent this is understandable given the immediacy of Russia's security challenge to northern Europe. For southern European NATO allies, conflict and instability in the Middle East and Africa and Russian meddling in their backyard rightfully rank as their most pressing security threats. On the other hand, the countries of the Mediterranean have not been sufficiently investing in the defense capabilities needed to meet this challenge, with most of them well below the 2 percent spending threshold.

**Defense Spending Levels.** The lackluster defense spending in Italy, Portugal, Spain, and even France (which only recently hit 2 percent of GDP) stand in stark contrast to the relatively impressive spending levels by their northern NATO partners. Many western NATO countries remain below the agreed-upon annual 2 percent of GDP target and are therefore far below the 3 percent spending requested by incoming Trump Administration officials to meet today's expanded deterrence requirements.

**The Mediterranean and Red Seas.** A relatively modest amount of American trade moves through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, but these

have been central arteries for European trade, and shipping disruptions have increased shipping times and costs.<sup>13</sup> Despite this, the U.S. Navy has taken the lead on threats in the Red Sea, leading the fight against Houthi attacks on shipping. Concurrently, Russian presence and aggression in the Mediterranean basin has increased. With hypersonic missile tests in the eastern Mediterranean,<sup>14</sup> targeting support for the Houthis,<sup>15</sup> and redeployment of forces from Syria to Libya,<sup>16</sup> Russia is directly compounding the instability and conflict it has long fed indirectly. France, Greece, Italy, and Spain all have naval capabilities, but they have not properly focused or resourced deterrence at this time.

In 2025, the French navy's Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier and associated strike group will pass through the Red Sea on a six-month deployment to the Indo-Pacific. This activity underlines the central line of operation linking metropolitan France with its territories and bases in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>17</sup> Yet despite the Red Sea's strategic importance, France declined to join America's Operation Prosperity Guardian in the Red Sea, relying instead on the "lowest common denominator of agreement" represented by Operation Aspides, run by the European Union (EU).<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the much smaller Grecian navy has stepped up, with its Rear Admiral Vasileios Gryparis assuming operational command of Operation Aspides, but it is hamstrung by force levels resting at a handful of rotating frigates.<sup>19</sup> The EU's anti-piracy Operation Atalanta off the Horn of Africa fields less than a handful of warships<sup>20</sup> just as Operation Irini, responsible for enforcing the United Nations arms embargo against Libya, relies on limited assets.<sup>21</sup>

Two factors lie at the root of these limited deployments: missing political will and under-strength military assets. Italian political will has been missing in action despite statements from military leaders that "our commitment to the security of the Red Sea and other crisis areas must fund support through additional funding that goes beyond the scope envisaged with the recent approval of the budget law."<sup>22</sup> Instead, Italian politicians have adopted a placating strategy of agreeing to send minimal Italian troops into NATO operations rather than increasing their capabilities.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, in 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron announced major defense spending increases set to take place through 2030,<sup>24</sup> yet the viability of sustained increases is in doubt after the French government fell apart at the end of 2024 over budget disagreements.<sup>25</sup> Looking on from the sidelines, Spain has declined to participate in Operation Prosperity Guardian and Operation Aspides<sup>26</sup> while remaining stuck in minority government with the lowest national spending among NATO members not counting Iceland.<sup>27</sup> Given the increasingly contested Mediterranean strategic environment,

scattered strategic commitment and insufficient defense resourcing will compromise the Article 3 commitments that lay at the heart of NATO's assurance of collective defense, if continued.

**Stability Operations in Africa.** France has long been engaged in stability operations in Africa, although it has suffered serious setbacks in recent years. Sparked by a wave of coups starting in 2020 (some of which were facilitated by Russia<sup>28</sup>) and culminating in recent expulsions by long-time partners, local discontent with French presence has increased in many African countries, leading to an exodus of forces and reduced basing and logistics connections. In particular, this has resulted in the 2022 end of the long-running French counterterrorism Operation Barkhane in West Africa<sup>29</sup> and expulsions of French troops and closing of French bases in Mali, the Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal, Chad, and Ivory Coast.<sup>30</sup> French forces in Africa have been deployed only to Djibouti (about 1,500 soldiers) and Gabon (roughly 350 soldiers).<sup>31</sup> Thanks to these limitations, France's ability to conduct enduring stability operations in Africa has been significantly reduced. France's regional shortcomings were a major factor in the expulsion of U.S. troops from Niger in 2024.<sup>32</sup>

Portugal has some productive engagements with African nations for regional security. For example, Portugal has maintained a force of around 200 personnel as part of a wider United Nations mission in the Central African Republic.<sup>33</sup> Portugal is the only NATO member state that is currently contributing troops to the Central African Republic.<sup>34</sup> Portugal recently signed a bilateral strategic cooperation deal with Cabo Verde, including upgrades to technical police forces and civil protection efforts.<sup>35</sup> The nations had collaborated on previous defense efforts, including Cabo Verdean forces in a Portuguese-led EU mission in Mozambique targeting capacity-building and training initiatives.<sup>36</sup> Portugal's "Open Sea" initiative maintains cooperation and secures international commitments to provide security in a key trade region. Helena Carreiras, Portugal's former defense minister, described maritime African operations as "fundamental to our economic and social development" while acknowledging "huge challenges for maritime security, such as piracy, high sea crime, illegal, undeclared and unregulated fisheries, or pollution."<sup>37</sup>

Italy and Spain, despite having far more military capability and economic capacity than Portugal has, are far less involved in these sorts of security operations. If Italy and Spain were to follow Portugal's lead in engaging with African governments on stability operations and regional security, it could have an extremely positive effect on reducing migrant flows, risk of terrorism, disruptions to trade, and adversarial encroachment in the

region while also benefiting trade and economic growth for all involved. On this final front, however, some encouraging moves have been made: Italy's Mattei Plan for Africa works to expand Western economic development partnerships with African countries across the continent,<sup>38</sup> France publicly backed Morocco's plans vis-à-vis its Western Sahara region,<sup>39</sup> and Spanish–Moroccan cooperation on trade and migration continue to climb in tandem.<sup>40</sup> Increased engagement by Italy and Spain could have significant positive effects on regional security and ought to be encouraged by American policymakers.

## Strategic Distraction

**NATO Pressure to Spread Spending and Operations Across an Excessive Priority List.** NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept identified Russia as the preeminent challenge to member states' security, but it also recognized a host of additional security challenges, including "terrorism; conflict and instability in the Middle East and Africa; pervasive instability and its impact on civilians; cultural property and the environment; China's stated ambitions and coercive policies; cyberspace, emerging and disruptive technologies; the erosion of arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation structures; and the security implications of climate change." Given this extensive list of assessed security threats, it is easy to imagine how policymakers in a NATO country might struggle for strategic focus. Some of the list's categories can best be addressed through regional specialization and prioritization within the NATO alliance informed by each NATO country's geographic position.

Of course, other perceived threats listed by the NATO Strategic Concept serve as a distraction to NATO governments' defense planners. Cultural property and the environment, or climate change, for example, definitively fall outside NATO's proper remit.

**Perceived American Pressure to "Do More on China."** Some in the American defense policy community have pushed Europe to assist the United States in deterring China, even as other American experts have recommended that Europe focus on Russia so that the United States can refocus its efforts on China. Understandably, this has led to some confusion for European policymakers, who have responded with symbolic measures such as sending warships to the Indo–Pacific and writing strategy documents for the region. While the symbolic intent behind these measures is appreciated, European military power is unlikely to deter China from launching a war of aggression against Taiwan.

The best thing European countries can do to help the United States balance against China is to take primary responsibility for conventionally deterring Russia. As the Trump Administration reassesses America's current military posture and transitions needed capabilities to the Indo-Pacific, European NATO allies will need to ensure that the American pivot does not weaken deterrence against Russia. In this broader strategic context, America's European allies can best enhance NATO deterrence by resourcing additional capabilities in the Arctic, Baltic, and Mediterranean to deter Russian and Chinese adventurism. Not only would this focus align with local expertise and counter proximate threats, but it would also allow the United States to deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific.

However, NATO allies can signal to the United States that they take American concerns over China seriously through economic and diplomatic measures. The United States would welcome (1) official statements condemning incidents of Chinese territorial encroachment or outright aggression against India, the Philippines, and Vietnam and (2) economic derisking in a serious and sustainable way, ensuring that defense-applicable technologies do not reach China from Europe. Derisking measures could also include supply-chain transparency efforts followed by diversifying defense items' suppliers, enhanced domestic research security measures, and targeted export restrictions on sensitive defense and dual-use items.

## Recommendations

- **Increase defense spending toward 3 percent of GDP.** Security challenges are proliferating, and spending by NATO members was far too low for the three decades after the end of the Cold War. Defense spending will need to increase beyond the 2 percent spending floor toward 3 percent to meet the security challenges of the 2020s and 2030s.
- **Strengthen regional focus for procurement, operations, and force posture.** Northern European countries should maintain strategic focus on deterring Russian aggression, with procurement, operations, and force posture focused on the Baltic Sea and the Arctic. Mediterranean European nations should focus on securing their near abroad to reduce the risk of terrorism, migrant flows, trade disruptions, and encroachment by adversarial nations in the Middle East and Africa.
- **Support U.S. efforts to deter Chinese aggression through economic and diplomatic measures.** There is not much that European



nations can contribute militarily to deter Chinese aggression in the Indo–Pacific, but there are economic and diplomatic measures they should take to deter China and signal their seriousness on the matter to American policymakers.

## Conclusion

NATO member states have rightfully insisted on bolstering capabilities with additional defense spending rather than arbitrarily padding European defense budgets. They should concentrate on their immediate regional security challenges with capabilities best suited to those environments. For America’s Nordic and Baltic allies, this means doubling down on the High North and the Baltic Sea to reinforce strategic deterrence against Russian and Chinese aggression there. In concert, America’s southern NATO allies should augment their capabilities to guarantee Mediterranean and Red Sea security in contribution to NATO’s overall security activities.

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