

# The Russian Threat: Bolstering NATO Deterrence at a Critical Time

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Russia's war of naked aggression against Ukraine puts into sharp relief the importance of the NATO Alliance and the need for it to focus on collective defense.

NATO must signal that it is strengthening deterrence measures explicitly in response to the Ukraine invasion—as Russia could also attack a neighboring NATO member.

Measures should include recommitment to defense spending, persistent and continuing presence in Eastern European member states, and updated operational planning.

The security and prosperity of the transatlantic community, including the United States, rests on the foundation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russia's ongoing war of naked aggression against Ukraine, a NATO non-member state, should put to rest any lingering questions about the modern utility of the Alliance and about which threat should be the focus of NATO's upcoming strategic concept.

The answer is clear: The U.S. must lead the Alliance to a wholesale refocusing on the organization's *raison d'être* of collective defense. While the Alliance faces challenges emanating from an unstable Mediterranean basin and terrorism originating from the Middle East, the fact remains that Russia continues to be the only existential threat to member states. NATO must send a strong signal that it is strengthening deterrence measures explicitly in response to the increased threat from Russia.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5252>

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Deterrence measures should include an Alliance-wide recommitment to defense spending; a persistent and continuing U.S. presence in Eastern European member states; updated Alliance operational planning in light of Russia's position in Belarus and Ukraine; and an increase in U.S. air, ground, and naval forces in the European theater as a sign of continued commitment to the NATO treaty's Article 5.

These deterrence measures must be carried out with the recognition that, from a long-term perspective, China is the largest peer challenger from whom the U.S. must expect hostile action. Any improvements to the U.S. force posture must not be to the detriment of the nation's ability to counter China.

## The Importance of NATO Deterrence Has Only Increased

From the Arctic to the Levant, Russia remains an aggressive and capable threat to NATO and the interests of its members. For member states in Eastern Europe, Russia represents a real and potentially existential threat. Russia's entrenched position in Belarus, along with its ongoing actions to cleave Ukraine, a nation that borders four NATO members, in two, scramble the geostrategic map of Europe and necessitate changes to NATO operational planning, exemplifying the need for the Alliance to take swift and resolute steps to bolster deterrence measures along its eastern flank.

Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine will hopefully be the push that some allies need to finally live up to their commitments to the NATO defense spending benchmark. As an intergovernmental security alliance, NATO is only as strong as its member states. Weak defense spending on the continent has led to a significant loss of capabilities and embarrassing gaps in readiness for NATO allies. As a result, American Presidents of both political parties have long called for increases in defense spending by NATO allies.

Although most are familiar with Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty—an attack on one is an attack on all—Article 3 is the most important when it comes to the overall health of the Alliance. Article 3 states that member states, at a minimum, will “maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.” Only a handful of NATO members can legitimately say that they are living up to their Article 3 commitment.

In 2006, in an effort to encourage defense investment, NATO set a target for its 30 member states to spend 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. At the 2014 Wales Summit, member states recommitted to spending 2 percent of GDP on defense and committed to spending 20 percent of their defense budgets on “major equipment” purchases by 2024.

NATO allies have made real and sustained increases in defense spending in recent years, but it is far from enough. In 2021, 10 members of the Alliance spent 2 percent of GDP on defense, and 24 members met the 20 percent benchmark.<sup>1</sup> Procuring capabilities does not happen overnight, and allies in NATO must commit today to investing the necessary political and economic capital to fulfill their Article 3 treaty commitments.

## U.S. Deployments in Europe Can Magnify NATO Deterrence

U.S. basing structures in Europe harken back to a time when Denmark, West Germany, and Greece represented the front lines of freedom. The security situation in Europe has changed, not least of which due to Russia's force posture in Belarus and occupied portions of Ukraine. The U.S. must account for this shift by establishing a persistent and continuing military presence in allied nations further east. A robust presence displays the long-term U.S. resolve to live up to its NATO treaty commitments. The U.S. should lead by example, while also encouraging other NATO allies to base forces in Eastern European member states.

Over the course of the past few weeks, the U.S. has deployed additional rotational forces in Europe. On Thursday, 7,000 troops from the Army's First Brigade, Third Infantry Division, deployed to bases in Germany.<sup>2</sup> In total, the U.S. has deployed an additional 14,000 troops to Europe in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine. The U.S. has also redeployed aircraft further east on a temporary basis, including 20 Apache helicopters (AH-64s) based in Germany deploying to Baltic allies, 12 AH-64s based in Greece deploying to Poland,<sup>3</sup> and six F-35 fighter jets from Utah deploying temporarily to bases in Estonia, Lithuania, and Romania.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, two B-52s from the 5th Bomb Wing deployed on a "long-planned Bomber Task Force Europe mission over the Arctic and Baltic Sea regions."<sup>5</sup>

Earlier in February, the U.S. deployed 3,000 forces to Poland and Romania to bolster deterrence and aid in preparations for refugees crossing the border from Ukraine. The U.S. Department of Defense noted that "[t]hese moves are temporary in nature, and are part of the more than 90,000 U.S. troops already in Europe on rotational and permanent orders."

Some NATO allies have also increased their presence further east. Germany, which serves as the framework nation in Lithuania for NATO's enhanced forward presence battalion stationed there, added 350 troops.<sup>6</sup> NATO allies have battlegroups stationed in Estonia (U.K.-led), Latvia (Canadian-led), and Poland (U.S.-led); France has offered to lead a similar battalion in Romania, and stated that it is "accelerating" the deployment

of forces to the nation.<sup>7</sup> On Friday, NATO activated its Very High Readiness Joint Taskforce (VJTF), with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stating: “We are now deploying the NATO response force for the first time in the context of collective defense.”<sup>8</sup> NATO will partially deploy a portion of the VJTF to Eastern Europe; the deployment will include air, land, and naval assets.<sup>9</sup>

## No Time to Lose

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine highlights the stark reality that the threat from Russia to NATO is real and enduring. The U.S. and its allies must take immediate steps to bolster collective defense and deter Vladimir Putin from aggression against a NATO member state. In light of the emerging new security reality on the continent, the U.S. should:

- **Reaffirm the importance of Article 3.** Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty is the most important when it comes to the overall health of the Alliance. Article 3 states that member states, at a minimum, will “maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.” Only a handful of NATO members can say that they are living up to their Article 3 commitment. This is a case where “naming and shaming” should play a role. The U.S. should focus on those nations that do not have a plan to increase defense spending.
- **Encourage NATO members to make increased defense spending the law of the land.** Some allies have passed legislation requiring that a certain amount of GDP be spent on international aid, while failing to do the same for defense spending. The U.S. should encourage NATO members to enshrine defense spending commitments and timelines in legislation. This would help to increase transparency and political accountability.
- **Call a special meeting to renew focus on defense spending.** NATO should call a special session to discuss the need for immediate commitment of allies to meeting NATO defense spending benchmarks. This session should include as many finance ministers as possible. In many parliamentary democracies, it is the finance minister who controls public spending. Educating the finance ministers on the importance of military investment might help to secure more defense spending over the long term. Germany’s recent announcement that it would finally work to meet its 2 percent spending commitment shows that the time is ripe for such a push.

- **Encourage allies to make a public case for defense spending.** An average of 71 percent of the publics across NATO believes that their country should defend another NATO ally if attacked. To honor this commitment, however, a nation must have the appropriate capabilities and manpower. Leaders in Canada and Europe should not take public support for NATO membership for granted. Instead, the strategic review should encourage governments to strongly and consistently make the case for NATO, and for the importance of robust defense spending, to their publics.
- **Establish a persistent and continuing presence in Eastern European member states.** Persistent and continuing deployments could include a U.S. Army heavy division in Poland (not just the headquarters, but a division with three full brigade combat teams) with supporting air defense and long-range fires or stationing a U.S. Air Force Wing in Europe. It is important to note that while new rotational forces in Europe certainly improve deterrence, they are an unequal substitute for permanently stationed forces. Living, operating, and training where the fighting will occur is an advantage that both U.S. allies and adversaries enjoy. Permanently stationed forces have better person-to-person contacts with allies, as well as improved doctrinal, technical, and cultural interoperability.
- **Increase the U.S. Naval presence near Russia.** U.S. military planners should not underestimate the importance of a robust naval component for deterrence. The U.S. should ensure a continued robust Naval presence in key regions, such as the North Atlantic, the eastern Mediterranean, and the northern Pacific, as a means of additional deterrence against Russia. Given Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, near-term consideration should be given for increased naval presence in the Baltic Sea to signal commitment to Baltic State NATO members, as well as to allies Finland and Sweden, who have come under renewed threat from Russia regarding potential future accession to NATO.
- **Develop the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) to bolster U.S. non-strategic nuclear capabilities.** Russia deploys thousands of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe meant for use on the battlefield; meanwhile, U.S. nuclear forces in this category are very limited. Fielding the SLCM-N, as proposed by the Trump Administration in 2018, would help to fill this gap in U.S. nuclear deterrence

should conventional conflict in Europe escalate. Conversely, canceling the SLCM-N after the program has already been initiated would only signal further weakness to Russia and NATO at a time when nuclear threats are growing.<sup>10</sup>

- **Encourage allies to increase their presence in Eastern Europe.** For NATO allies in Eastern Europe, the threat from Russia is existential and looming, the U.S. should encourage all allies of the Alliance<sup>11</sup> to contribute forces to Eastern European theaters in a show of unity against Russian aggression.

## A Critical Time for Deterrence

Russia's ongoing violation of the sovereignty of Ukraine highlights the importance of NATO and its Article 5 guarantee, as well as the need for a united and robust Alliance posture in Eastern Europe. Both are necessary for sending a clear message to Russia to deter Putin from violating the sovereignty of a NATO member.

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## Endnote

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