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Block, Blunt, Break: NATO's New Theory of Victory

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

NATO's new theory of victory, Block, Blunt, Break, would stop a Russian attack at the point of contact instead of trading territory for time.

Defending every inch from the outset suits the geography of the Baltic States, which lack strategic depth, and denies Moscow a quick land grab.

To make the strategy credible, European allies need to keep raising defense spending, deploy forces forward, and improve military mobility.

On October 12, 2026, U.S. Air Force General Alexus Grynkewich, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), gave a speech at the Warsaw Security Forum in Poland in which he outlined NATO's new theory of victory to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russian aggression.[1] This theory of victory, called "Block, Blunt, Break," centers on employing combined arms and maneuver to block initial enemy assaults on Alliance territory, blunt follow-on offensives, and, if necessary, break the enemy's ability to sustain combat operations. SACEUR's speech comes at a time of considerable consternation in Eastern European capitals after months of suspected Russian hybrid activities including drone incursions and sabotage. General Grynkewich's deterrence-focused theory of victory struck the right tone, reassuring worried allies and

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signaling to Moscow that the United States and its NATO allies are confident of their ability to defeat a Russian incursion into a NATO state and that Russia would do well not to consider one. The speech and the strategy itself also appear wisely designed to avoid unnecessary escalation with Russia as SACEUR made clear throughout that NATO is a defensive Alliance.

Block, Blunt, Break

General Grynkewich said that a classified version of this new NATO strategy had been agreed on by all 32 members of the Alliance about three months before his October 12 speech.[2] He explained his decision to present Block, Blunt, Break in public as a helpful measure to assuage increasingly anxious NATO populations vulnerable to evolving security threats.[3] General Grynkewich summarized his theory of victory as follows: "We will block the initial attack. If the attack persists, we will blunt it and prevent enemy advance. And if required, we will break the enemy's forces and the operational warfighting system that is arrayed against us."[4]

Block. NATO land forces will meet any enemy assault with preponderant force at the point of contact and not trade territory for time. As these forces prevent adversaries from seizing Alliance territory, air and sea forces will gain superiority before aggressively supporting NATO forces on the ground. Space and cyber forces will be employed, creating a lattice of forces meant to prevent the enemy from holding its ground.

Blunt. Following the block phase, NATO forces will focus on denying the enemy's ability to generate offensive momentum. This effort will include expanded deployments of manned and autonomous forces across domains to maintain operational advantage. The mass employment of effects in the forward battlespace will overwhelm enemy formations, thereby disrupting any continued advance.

Break. If the enemy continues its attack or employs reserves, NATO forces will expand operations to break the enemy's broader warfighting system. NATO will apply mass pressure through all domains to break down the enemy's ability to sustain its forces. A major contributing factor to this pressure campaign will be the pairing of precision munitions with sweeping volumes of attritable and affordable effects. These efforts will isolate enemy formations from replenishment and paralyze the command and control of the opposing force.[5]

Strategic Context

This theory of victory is a marked shift from earlier NATO theories of victory, which focused on trading space for time—that is, allowing Russian forces to move into NATO territory, while NATO forces harass and slow Russian advances until decisive force can be brought to bear to destroy and then expel all Russian forces from NATO territory.

Block, Blunt, Break is a significant change from NATO Cold War strategy.

During the Cold War, West Germany was the NATO state considered most likely to be attacked by massive numbers of Soviet-led Warsaw Pact forces, and the Fulda Gap was often identified as the most likely attack route. The geographic size of West Germany meant that NATO forces could fall back tens or hundreds of kilometers before they could generate enough combat mass to begin a counteroffensive against Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces and then expel them from NATO soil. In this sense, NATO planned to trade territory for time, during which it would seize the conventional advantage.

Today, the Suwalki Gap between Lithuania and Poland is often cited as the modern equivalent of the Fulda Gap, especially because it separates Russian-allied Belarus from the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.[6] The three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are for numerous reasons the NATO states against which full-scale Russian aggression is most likely; for example, Russian revanchists claim the existence of Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia as a potential pretext, and Russian military planners could seek to connect the Russian exclave by land to either Belarus or Russia, and Lithuania is in their way. In the Baltic States, Block, Blunt, Break makes sense as the strategy for deterring or defending against Russian aggression from both a military planning and a political perspective.

From a military planning perspective, the lack of strategic depth in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania was likely a major factor in the change in strategy. Blocking the Russian advance from the outset prevents the Russians from gaining a foothold that may prove difficult to dislodge once fortified and reinforced.

From a political perspective, Block, Blunt, Break reinforces allied cohesion in the face of Russian aggression against a Baltic state or some other frontline state. Should Russia rapidly gain lodgment within Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, it could then sue for peace before NATO could dislodge Russian forces and liberate those three NATO members. This could well create real political divisions within the North Atlantic Council, in which some countries would press for the liberation of the Baltic States, while others may seek to accept the peace proposal. It is not inconceivable that

such a development could lead to the fracturing and potential breakup of NATO—long a goal of Moscow. This new strategy articulated by SACEUR could be a way to defend every inch of NATO soil from the outset and prevent this difficult scenario.

Strategic Signals

General Grynkewich used his speech at the Warsaw Security Forum to demonstrate how NATO allies intend to prevent conflict and defeat aggression if needed. He stressed that NATO's Block, Blunt, Break strategy is defensive and seeks to prevent enemies from achieving their offensive objectives. While detailing this theory of victory, General Grynkewich provided a vision for a future NATO with enhanced military strength, operational readiness, and a unified commitment to the defense of all the Alliance's territory.

This speech landed amid persistent suspected Russian gray-zone warfare against European NATO member states. On October 13, Bulgaria's government summoned the Russian ambassador after two ships were hit by drones near its territorial waters.[7] Two additional merchant ships were struck by drones near Bulgaria's coast the week before, attacks that followed a strike on a civilian ship off Romania,[8] and Romania has faced repeated Russian drone incursions over the past year.[9]

While not mentioning these and other similar events directly, General Grynkewich stated that threats and intimidation against Alliance members will only bind NATO closer together. He noted that this unity is enhanced by the Alliance's confidence in its ability to move up the escalation ladder if needed. General Grynkewich identified NATO's strength, cohesion, and readiness as important factors that should significantly complicate an adversary's military calculus of escalation. SACEUR also exhorted European NATO allies not to shy away from identifying the source of gray-zone provocations when they occur.

The United States' ongoing European force posture review and discussions of a likely reduction in U.S. troop levels in Europe as part of the necessary rebalancing of forces to the Indo-Pacific have led to uncertainty among NATO allies regarding America's contributions to the Alliance.[10] General Grynkewich's speech reaffirmed the United States' commitment to European security, albeit within the larger framework of increased burden sharing promoted by the Trump Administration.

NATO's theory of victory relies on aggressive, forward resistance to enemy advances. Implementing this operational concept will require the

Alliance to bring substantial force to bear within a constrained timeline. While General Grynkewich's speech serves as an overt commitment to a continued American presence in NATO, European states will likely have to shoulder a significant burden as part of the rapid joint response to an attack on the Alliance. To ensure NATO's ability to execute this plan, European states should continue expanding their defense spending to improve their warfighting capabilities, forward-deploy certain capabilities, and substantially improve military mobility.

General Grynkewich prefaced his explanation of NATO's theory of victory with a frank assessment of NATO's security environment. He held that conflict is neither imminent nor inevitable. This status quo, he said, can be sustained by clearly articulating NATO's intentions, maintaining open lines of communication with external states, and maintaining deterrence by denial through military capacity.

Commenting on the character of NATO, General Grynkewich stressed that the Alliance is defensive and has "no plans, no intentions, and no ambitions" other than the protection of NATO peoples and territories. SACEUR nevertheless cautioned potential adversaries not to mistake NATO's defensive nature for a lack of resolve and emphasized that member states will ensure any attack on Alliance territory will prove futile.[11]

This point was underlined by additional commentary regarding NATO's deterrence posture. General Grynkewich drew attention to the Alliance's "decision advantage." He asserted that NATO will not be caught by surprise thanks to an immense intelligence footprint encompassing a vast network of sensors and sources. General Grynkewich framed NATO's intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capability as a key enabler of the Alliance's theory of victory. By rapidly assessing an opposing force's presence and intent, NATO forces will have time to mobilize in the numbers required to deny attackers at the point of contact, especially because these troops will be reinforcing significant numbers of NATO troops forward positioned within NATO's easternmost states.

Because of NATO's doctrine, character, and posture, General Grynkewich remarked that the burden of escalation will always lie upon NATO's aggressors. NATO's Block, Blunt, Break strategy seeks only to prevent an enemy from realizing its revisionist aspirations. He plainly asserted that such states will "bear the full moral, political, and strategic weight" of initiating and expanding conflict with the Alliance.[12]

General Grynkewich included within this posture of deterrence and denial an explicit characterization of NATO's intentions after the outbreak of conflict. He emphasized that the Alliance's Block, Blunt, Break strategy

does not seek at the outset to impose a strategic defeat upon its adversaries. Instead, NATO seeks simply to employ its theory of victory to maintain the Alliance's territorial integrity by tactically defeating its attackers.

In sum, General Grynkewich used his speech at the Warsaw Security Forum to communicate fundamental Alliance convictions to audiences both within and outside NATO. He articulated how NATO is not simply relying on decades-old defense strategies but adopting new means to meet emerging security threats. He delineated an internal Alliance dynamic defined by cohesion anchored in a collective determination to defend Alliance territory from opportunistic adversaries. He portrayed to external audiences a NATO whose mandate is limited to protecting its citizens and territory but that is also unified and firm in its willingness to fight and to defeat an aggressor if needed. General Grynkewich confidently messaged to Russia that he wants to assure those who "might be thinking about doing harm against us, that we've got this, and that they better not take any shot at the alliance."[13]

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Endnotes

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