

Spring 2025 - Marcellus Policy Analysis

## A New Strategy for NATO

By Corey Shiver

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The transatlantic relationship is at a crossroads. Currently engrossed in the transformative foreign policy of President Donald Trump, the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners are consumed in debate as to how European security should be achieved. This debate on burden-sharing has created tension and uncertainty within the alliance.

This battle is the result of decades of faulty strategy practiced by both sides. The United States has maintained a costly presence in Europe since the end of World War II. The threat of Soviet expansionism quelled any plans for the United States to permanently remove its troops from the region or draw down its commitment to the NATO alliance. Even after the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States maintained the status quo of forward deploying thousands of troops and operating military bases in the region.

In the eyes of President Dwight Eisenhower, the United States has failed in its European strategy. Immediately following World War II, President Eisenhower understood that the commitment of the United States military on the European continent was meant to be temporary, to allow European partners to rebuild while enjoying the benefits of American-provided security.<sup>1</sup> This “temporary” deployment of forces has not ended since the end of

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World War Two; a much more permanent engagement than was originally planned.

The United States, under President Trump, is poised to draw down forces in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Although the exact cost is not publicly known, a summary review of costs related to forward deployed troops in Europe equates to billions of U.S. government dollars. As President Trump continues to seek new ways to save taxpayer dollars and reallocate resources to address the United States' growing debt problems, he may see American engagement in Europe as a high cost, low return issue.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is in the interest of both the United States and NATO-member states to plan for the potential scenario in which the United States reduces its forces in Europe.

One way to ensure that NATO remains strong without significant American contribution is by constructing an extensive framework in which NATO becomes a cohesive military organization internal to Europe. Within this proposed framework, member states would be designated with agreed-upon specializations of one or multiple capabilities, determined based on preexisting strengths and weaknesses. For example, if a country currently possesses a strong missile defense capability, then that country's military should focus on specializing within that role. Between all members and their specializations, they can cohesively operate in the eventuality of conflict, so long as they continue to ensure compatibility and operational efficiency.

## Why Change?

This strategy would benefit both sides of the alliance. For the United States, a drawdown from Europe may facilitate the repatriation of capabilities or their redeployment to the Indo-Pacific. Concurrently, active European engagement in this strategy would optimize individual defense spending, allowing members to prioritize their respective strengths while relying on partners for complementary capabilities. This specialization would yield cost efficiencies across the Atlantic.

A comprehensive plan to maximize the current efficiencies of each European country and build a framework for compatible specialization allows each country to build upon their existing defense budget trends. Although increased investment in defense capabilities would continue to be necessary, investing

in a country's designated specialization would cost less than broad investments into the country's entire military. While this plan does not call for the divestment of a country's entire military, it promotes that the rest of a European country's military, apart from the designated specialization, would receive less funding than practiced currently. To maintain the sovereignty of each country, there should be some effort to preserve the remaining features of each country's military outside of the country's NATO designation. With that said, no European country, specifically among the most powerful in Western Europe, faces direct threats on their border in the near term, nor is there a risk of a member of NATO achieving hegemony over the region. Therefore, European NATO members can afford to trust in the alliance and invest in their compatibility.

## Addressing Criticisms

While there are many benefits to implementing a specialization framework within the European side of the NATO alliance, several criticisms must be addressed as well. The potential for some states to free ride would be prevalent. Currently, eight NATO members do not meet the current two percent of GDP defense spending target.<sup>4</sup> These countries primarily are located further from Russia than some of their colleagues, limiting risks of military action against their respective territory. However, this limits the scale of the region's industrial base and causes interoperability issues within the alliance. Additionally, the alliance has yet to update the defense spending target threshold that efficiently applies to modern economic and geopolitical conditions, as the current target was last updated in 2014. Although the proposed specialization framework provides the opportunity for countries to not have to spend unattainable amounts of federal funding towards their defense, updating and meeting the NATO defense spending target remains vital to the sustainment of this plan and the alliance in its entirety.

The argument that a specialization framework would constrain each participant's sovereignty is realistic given Europe's history of struggle against states seeking hegemony over the region. However, both issues can be solved with trust and monitoring. All countries within the alliance have a shared stake in the security of their respective states and their

allies; if an ally were to fail in the defense of its own territory, this would cause surrounding states to be less secure. Additionally, continued participation within the program along with sustained monitoring of each other's capabilities through repetitive security cooperation will create a sense of trust that is lacking from the proposed criticisms.

More importantly, the lack of leadership within the reformed alliance may present increased challenges. Currently, the United States serves as the leader of the alliance. However, with a smaller U.S. commitment to the alliance, critics posit that a vacuum of leadership will appear. A glance into NATO's current model for leadership will present relief to these criticisms.

NATO currently employs a command structure in which a committee of each member state's Chief of Defense chairs a Military Committee, providing for continuity and equal representation.<sup>5</sup> Subordinate to the Military Committee are the commanders of NATO's two strategic commands, the Allied Command Operations (ACO) and the Allied Command Transformation (ACT).<sup>6</sup> The ACO is responsible for all NATO military operations, whereas the ACT oversees NATO's military transformation. It is probable that the ACT would head the implementation of the proposed specialization framework within the organization, while the chairs of the Military Committee ensure their respective country's defense ministries and industries follow the model that would be developed. To replace American leadership, European representation in many of these higher-level positions previously occupied by American generals will be required but would likely create little friction.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation's (SACT) headquarters would need to relocate to Europe, as it is currently in Norfolk, Virginia.<sup>8</sup>

However, the current model provides for the effective leadership of NATO by European defense officials beyond America's participation in the organization should the United States eventually dwindle its presence within the alliance. The equal representation of the Military Committee ensures that hegemony would be unattainable within the alliance, especially when coupled with continuous monitoring of progress and programs from all member states.

## **Compatibility Necessities: Logistics,**

## **Weapons, and People**

Should the European defense specialization framework be adopted and instituted by NATO, the European defense industrial base would require revitalization. Following Russia's latest invasion of Ukraine, Europe recognized its dire defensive posture. Constrained by limited manpower and munitions, the Europeans recognized their inability to provide for the defense of the region should the situation arise. Since then, the European Union established the European Defense Industry Program (EDIP), aiming to boost production for Europe's defense industrial base.<sup>9</sup>

While an increase in funding will be beneficial for the revitalization of Europe's defense industry and would be crucial to begin NATO's shift to the proposed specialization framework, merely augmenting defense budgets will not be enough. Defense ministers of each country will have to guide their respective private sectors to follow the framework as well. For example, there are 14 different European battle tank platforms and 30 different helicopter models, all requiring unique operating procedures and sustainment plans.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the Europeans will have to limit the diversity in available plans, as a smaller difference in operating weapon systems will allow for increased compatibility between partner militaries. This will also allow for a less complex sustainment plan for both peacetime and during a defensive campaign. If each partner military is shooting a different gun that requires unique ammunition, the capacity for shared logistical support becomes minimal. Instead, European NATO members will be required to decide on mutual or similar weapons systems and will need to develop a plan to sustain this large-scale logistical system. This responsibility could be shared between countries; however, it may be more practical to designate a country as the logistician of the framework.

In addition to maintaining the compatibility between weapon systems and logistics of NATO members, European defense officials must ensure compatibility between its service members. NATO membership is comprised of countries spanning several different cultures and languages, necessitating the continued practice of security cooperation through cross-training, joint exercises, and language training. Members of European militaries must be familiar with operating within a multinational fighting force. Therefore, language training must continue, and communications

processes must be perfected. Although joint exercises and trainings are common within the alliance today, these practices must endure after the United States is no longer the leader of the organization should the eventuality occur.

## Determining Factors of the Framework

To develop an effective defense specialization framework that Europeans will likely agree upon, the plan will be required to consider each participant's internal factors, such as their military and political history, their geography, their defense budget trends, and their defense capabilities procurement projections.

A country's military and political history will persuade their decisions on defense. For the bulk of Europe, this memory will largely consider the Second World War and how the country fared in the massive conflict. For example, Poland will remember being outnumbered and encircled early in the war, facing invasion from both the Russians and the Germans. Recent Russian expansionism in Ukraine likely sparked memories and remembrance of the horrific experience the Polish faced in the Second World War. Poland's remembrance of this history is exemplified by its expanding defense budget, now spending 3.8% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) on defense.<sup>11</sup>

The geography of each participating country will also require consideration. Put simply, countries with a large coastline and access to the sea will require larger navies. Therefore, countries such as Italy and the United Kingdom should prioritize naval power, whereas countries such as Germany with limited sea access should focus more on land-based equipment.

In addition, the framework will need to consider each country's proximity to Russia, as Russia serves as the biggest threat to Europe for the time being. Countries in Eastern Europe would unfortunately serve as the battleground in the event of a conflict between Russia and NATO. Because of this, countries bordering Russia should prioritize capabilities that can hold off Russian invasion until reinforcements and support arrive from the rest of Europe, meaning that these countries would need to focus on the development of its infantry and quick reaction forces. Focusing on the infantry will also be realistic for many Eastern European countries unable to spend billions towards

defense, as many countries (with Poland serving as the caveat) will be unlikely to procure modern large weapon systems at the scale needed to support unilateral defense against a Russian invasion.

Each country would be required to meet a certain budget stipulation to support this proposed plan. Currently, NATO members must meet the compulsory 2% defense budget required by membership, although this has been less practiced and enforced in the past. Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, there has been a greater emphasis on member-states hitting this benchmark. This plan will aim to serve each country in their affordability of their defense, since they will not need to pay for the development of an entire military. With that said, governments will need to view this not as an opportunity to free ride, but instead as an opportunity to develop a collective defense structure impenetrable by any external conventional force around the world.

Lastly, the plan will need to consider each country's current defense procurement projections. For example, Germany has agreed to purchase a fleet of F-35A fighter aircraft.<sup>12</sup> If this foreign military sales (FMS) case continues, this will lead to Germany having an even more advanced aerial combat capability. This FMS case, along with other defense acquisitions across Europe spanning the next several years, will need to be evaluated to ensure that each country is effectively utilizing the weapons systems it has and will procure.

## Case Studies

This paper will briefly examine how some countries would fit into the proposed defense specialization plan to demonstrate why this course of action would be preferable to the status quo. This paper will consider how Germany, Poland, and Estonia would fit into the structure, as well as NATO partners that do not hold official membership within the organization. However, each country within NATO would need to be considered. Doing so would require deep research and analytical thought beyond the bounds of this paper, as such research would necessitate the creation of a dissertation or book. With that said, this paper will analyze Germany and Poland to introduce how NATO defense officials may approach creating such a framework.



## Germany

Germany, much like the rest of Europe, was spurred by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine to shift attention towards the defense of its territory and the region. Former German Chancellor Olaf Schulz characterized this shift by invoking the term *Zeitenwende*, symbolizing the turning point currently underway within German defense policy.<sup>13</sup>

In line with *Zeitenwende*, Germany released its first National Security Strategy in June 2023. Germany's 2023 National Security Strategy reaffirms German commitment to contribute to the NATO alliance, while also announcing a €100 billion (US\$109bn) special fund for the German armed forces.<sup>14</sup>

*Zeitenwende* provides the political momentum necessary to garner internal and external support for the implementation of a new strategic reframing of the NATO alliance more tailored to each country's strengths and weaknesses. As a regional leader and major contributor to the NATO alliance, Germany would likely be designated with several specializations.

One designation that Germany would likely agree upon would be to further specialize in air defense capabilities. As seen in Ukraine, the air domain has been redefined, with missiles and FPV drones dominating the battlefield and the home front. Therefore, as leader of the European Sky Shield Initiative, Germany is already guiding the region towards enhanced acquisition of air defense capabilities.<sup>15</sup> Although Germany will not have to support this requirement alone, as several other countries will likely play a supporting role, the designation of Germany as the manager of Europe's aerial defense is an easy decision to make.

Although Germany has one of the largest defense budgets in the NATO alliance, the operation of Germany's military and defense acquisition programs is constrained by Berlin's inability to escape the inefficiencies of its own bureaucracy. Because of overcomplicated rules set both domestically and within the EU, along with the overstaffing of Germany's government agencies, procurement projects for even the simplest cases run longer than anticipated. If the German Bundeswehr fails to reform, it will be unable to contribute to the proposed

specialization framework effectively.

To exemplify this, one can turn to one of several cases currently in limbo at the Federal Office of Bundeswehr Equipment, Information Technology and In-Service Support (BAAINBw). One such humorous example can be found in the BAAINBw's procurement of helmets for airborne soldiers that has taken more than 10 years to finalize.<sup>16</sup> This is because of self-inflicted regulations that order the repeated and extensive testing of the helmets to ensure that they will fit on German heads and measure up to German standards. This case is emblematic of the broader problems throughout the defense procurement agency of Germany, symbolizing the critical need for reform within the Bundeswehr and federal government of Germany.

## Poland

Prior to the Ukraine conflict, Poland maintained an average defense expenditure of around 2% of its GDP. Poland drastically increased its defense budget in 2023, spending 3.8% of its GDP towards defense.<sup>17</sup>

Poland faces increased risk of facing Russian aggression due to its proximity to Russia and its shared land border with Belarus. Belarus serves as a puppet state to Russia, evidenced by Belarusian support of Russia's war effort against Ukraine.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, Poland faces a higher risk of direct territorial invasion from its eastern border.

In addition to defending 388 miles of its shared border with Belarus and the Russian territory of Kaliningrad, Poland must consider the rest of its Eastern border in the case that Russian forces march through Poland's eastern allies. Therefore, Poland will also have to strategize for the scenario in which it has to defend its 329-mile border with Ukraine and its 64-mile border with Lithuania.

Due to this large territorial coverage, exacerbated by Poland's flat geography that benefits the rapid movement of ground forces, Poland must prioritize mechanized and armored forces. With this in mind, Poland's recent contracts to procure more K2 Black Panther and M1 Abrams tanks is easily justifiable.<sup>19</sup> However, Poland's acquisition of aerial assets, such as the recent \$10 billion deal for 96 AH-64E Apache Helicopters, would be considered unnecessary within

the proposed framework, unless NATO designates Poland as the alliance's leader for attack rotor aircraft or Warsaw is placed in a supporting role.<sup>20</sup> However, because of the increasing ineffectiveness of attack helicopters as seen in the conflict in Ukraine, this role is not nearly as necessary for both the maintenance of Polish sovereignty and the preservation of regional security. Therefore, under the proposed specialization framework, Poland would likely be designated with specializing in its land-based capabilities and would reallocate funding initially budgeted towards its rotor aircraft towards this more pertinent capability.

## **Estonia**

This paper's analysis of Germany and Poland as participants within a NATO specialization framework reflects how European states with major defense budgets would fit within the framework. They would primarily occupy multiple extensive roles that greatly support the multinational military organization. However, their inclusion in this paper without considering states with smaller militaries and defense budgets would result in this paper's failure to accurately portray what the specialization framework would look like.

Although Estonia has the second largest defense expenditure as a share of GDP within the NATO alliance (allocating 3.43% of its GDP towards its defense budget), the country's relatively smaller size both territorially and economically results in Estonia's government having less to spend in nominal terms on its own defense in comparison to its allies.<sup>21</sup> This prevents Estonia from having as large of a military in comparison to countries such as Germany and Poland. However, this does not prevent Estonia from becoming an active and influential member of the proposed specialization framework.

Most of Estonia's borders are shared with either Russia or two gulfs within the Baltic Sea. This necessitates Estonia's prioritization of both maritime and land-based defense requirements. However, because of Estonia's relatively smaller defense budget (around \$1.4 billion in 2024), Estonia's government will need to prioritize one requirement over the other.<sup>22</sup> This will be an easier decision than what may be initially anticipated due to Estonia's close maritime proximity to Finland. The Gulf of Finland is narrow, providing that if Finland were to prioritize maritime

capabilities, as should be the case due to the country's vast sea access, Estonia would be able to rely on Finland to cover this need. Instead, Estonia would be able to increase procurement for the protection of its shared land border with Russia.

Currently, Estonia is doing well within this regard, as it has signed contracts to procure anti-tank capabilities and support the development of capabilities possessed by its land-based personnel.<sup>23</sup> However, another area in which Estonians may rely on their NATO allies is aerial defense. As discussed previously, Germany is leading the initiative to expand NATO's aerial defense. While Estonia is currently supporting this initiative, their efforts and funding allocations would likely be more beneficial if spent towards its ground forces should they be supported within the proposed specialization framework.

The analysis of Estonia provides further justification for the structure that would comprise the proposed specialization framework. Put simply, Eastern Europe should prioritize the development of its land-based forces, seeking the immediate defense of its borders in the event of Russian invasion. Under the specialization framework, they would be immediately supported by forward deployed Western European military assets that would reinforce and supply the war effort. After the initial phases of the conflict, Western armies would then be activated and deployed to the area of conflict, in the likely event that Article V would be implemented, calling for the collective defense of a NATO partner in the event of military conflict.

## **External Partnerships**

NATO is an extensive alliance network that currently includes 32 countries as members. In addition, NATO maintains cooperative relations with 40 non-member partners in an effort to strengthen global security, in turn further securing the region of Europe.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, these external partnerships will need to be considered when drafting a specialization framework. To do so, NATO officials will be required to engage with these 40 or so partners to determine what they would be willing to provide in the event of conflict in Europe. This will need to be replicated on the other hand, with NATO offering to provide some capabilities to the partner depending on the likelihood of conflict in their respective area of responsibility (AOR). With that said, NATO officials will need to remember that their

prioritization should rely on securing Europe, allowing the United States and other countries to pivot to the Indo-Pacific or their own respective AORs.<sup>25</sup>

Working with external partners within Europe will provide more beneficial conditions in comparison to working with countries from other regions. The most apt example of NATO working with an external partner is Ukraine, as most of the continent now falls within the alliance besides a few outliers. Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, NATO's relationship with Ukraine has only grown. NATO members' support for Ukraine during this conflict has bolstered Ukraine's ability to resist Russia's invasion. This, along with the several agreements between NATO members and Ukraine pledging continued collaborative activities in the future, serves to evidence that this security cooperation is unlikely to cease following the conclusion of the conflict.<sup>26</sup>

The Ukrainian military has acquired a wealth of experience in modern combat. In addition, Ukraine has developed a sizeable defense industrial base and implemented an innovative defense acquisition process. These aspects of Ukraine's military development will be valuable to NATO partners, and NATO should learn from Ukraine's experiences in modern combat upon the conclusion of the war.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, both Ukraine and NATO gain to benefit from security cooperation in the relationship.

In consideration of the United States' new role as an external partner to NATO upon the successful implementation of this plan, senior military and political leadership will need to redetermine the range of Washington's commitment to the region. This will ultimately result in a much smaller presence in the region for reasons previously discussed but it should not be entirely drawn down.

Under this new plan, it is true that the United States will have the ability to vacate many of its bases in Europe, but the United States military does not need to completely remove itself from the continent. Instead, the United States should prioritize only the most critical logistical hubs and headquarters for staffing and operation, returning the rest of its bases to local governments. These major logistical and command hubs will allow the United States to sustain operations to maintain support for its European allies through programs such as foreign military sales

(FMS). The minimal basing in Europe will also allow for continued joint exercises critical for maintaining readiness and interoperability. However, the maintenance of a minimal American military presence in the region will adequately sustain readiness and collaboration while allowing the DoD to reallocate much-needed resources elsewhere.

## Conclusion

The NATO alliance requires restructuring. Global affairs outside of Europe call for the drawdown of American forces in the region to be returned to the United States or sent to the Indo-Pacific. This does not mean that Europe must be left weak and unable to provide for its own defense, which is not the case even now. However, defense officials on both sides of the Atlantic can plan for this eventual drawdown by drafting and implementing a plan similar to the one that this paper proposes, providing a strategic framework that realistically designates defense specializations to each participant that fits into a cohesive multinational military organization.

This specialization framework builds upon the current strengths of each member, while also realistically considering how each country can contribute to its own defense based on the trends of growth of their respective defense budgets. To finalize the plan, more research and increased key leader engagement would be necessary, as the plan must not only consider determining factors of each country involved but would also require the buy-in of each participant.

Satisfying every country within any security cooperation organization proves to be severely difficult. However, because of the shared threats NATO faces, along with the nature of the plan, in which NATO members are not being asked to drastically raise their defense budgets, but rather reorient their defense procurement strategies, buy-in should be more easily recognizable. This should especially occur if the proponents of the proposed plan persuade each country that the specialization framework would save their country's taxpayer dollars while also increasing security. This is truthfully the underlying motivation for the implementation of this plan.



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