

NATO'S NEW FORCE MODEL: ADAPTING TO A DYNAMIC SECURITY LANDSCAPE

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History shows that the Alliances which maintained relevant and timely transformation have outlived others. In this regard, NATO, the biggest political-military organization of its time might undoubtedly be referred as the most successful one of the same nature. The Alliance has managed to conduct proper transformation processes against the backdrop of various claims that it was obsolete or irrelevant at different times. Suffice to say that NATO adopted its New Strategic Concept and introduced its New Force Model (NFM) as a response to Russian war against Ukraine in 2022. The purpose of this paper is to analyze NATO's New Force Model (NFM) and justify its introduction in response to an evolving and dynamic security environment. The paper delineates NATO's NFM as a desperate need after the war between Russia and Ukraine broke out, highlights the main differences from the Old Force Model, since the ongoing processes prompted NATO to take stock of each and every single detail in a dramatically changing security landscape. The Hypothesis of the paper is that NATO's NFM is a necessary and timely transformation in response to the Russia-Ukraine war. The paper tries to find answers to the following research questions: 1. Why was NATO's New Force Model introduced, and how does it differ from the previous model? 2. How does the NFM address the challenges of an ever-changing security environment? To develop this paper, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, such as Comparative Analysis, Synthesis and Case Studies have been used. NATO's adoption of the NFM marks a significant shift in its approach to crisis response, deterrence, and collective defense. In response to the Russia-Ukraine war, hybrid warfare threats, and regional instability, the NFM enhances force allocation, interoperability, and preparedness to address evolving security challenges.

Key words: NATO, transformation, New Force Model, Old Force Model, NRF, ARF.

1. INTRODUCTION

History demonstrates the critical importance of forming alliances against common enemies and highlights that victory is most assured when allied forces operate in complete harmony. Disjointed military efforts among nations often prove less effective than integrated, cooperative strategies. However, over the past century, disparities in equipment, tactics, and a lack of cohesion have significantly weakened many alliances, as seen in conflicts such as the Korean War, the Dominican Civil War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War. Since its inception, NATO—the most successful military-political alliance in history—has actively addressed these challenges by developing interoperability frameworks, techniques, models, and measures to enhance unified military effectiveness (Nasirov & Iskandarov, 2017). NATO was once considered a vestige of a bygone era, but it swiftly reaffirmed its relevance—and even its importance—following the 1991 Rome Summit. By adopting a new Strategic Concept, the Alliance initiated a comprehensive transformation, adapting to the evolving security landscape and redefining its role in the post-Cold War world (Iskandarov et al., 2019a). To sustain peace and stability across

Europe, NATO recognized the necessity of expanding beyond its conventional borders following the Cold War. The integration of new members into the Alliance became a strategic priority, sparking extensive debates and leading to increased cooperation with partner countries. Emphasizing the importance of interoperability, NATO sought to ensure that partner forces could operate seamlessly together, enhancing collective security and operational effectiveness (Nasirov & Iskandarov, 2017).

Numerous academic studies explore NATO's transformation, analyzing its evolution from a Cold War alliance to a global security actor. There are plenty of prominent figures which have been both opponents and proponents of NATO enlargement, which in fact highlights the relevance of the topic throughout history. John S. Duffield (1994) aims to explain the factors behind NATO's enduring relevance and resilience right after the Cold War ended. Jamie Shea (2012) tries to justify the relevance of NATO in an entirely different landscape with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Ruiz Palmer (2019) addresses the aims, achievements and challenges of NATO's post-Cold War transformation. Andrea Gilli et al. (2020) focus on NATO's

technological transformation. In a number of papers dedicated to NATO's transformation and partnerships, Khayal Iskandarov and Piotr Gawliczek highlight the competition for power and influence in different regions and illustrate Russia's security interests in NATO's enlargement policy, examine the extent to which NATO partnership mechanisms contribute to the cooperation in the field of education and interoperability of forces (Nasirov & Iskandarov, 2017; Sadiyev & Iskandarov, 2018; Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2018; Hasanov, et al., 2019; Iskandarov, 2019a; Iskandarov, 2019b; Iskandarov et al., 2019b; Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2019; Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2020; Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2021; Iskandarov et al., 2023). A book edited by Jason Blessing et al. (2021) – "NATO 2030: Towards A New Strategic Concept and Beyond" provides new insights into NATO's changing threat landscape, shifting internal dynamics, and the evolution of warfare, offering perspectives on the alliance's future strategic direction.

However, only a handful of studies focus on NATO's transformation after 2022. For instance, Zoltan Szenes (2023) examines the Alliance's new perception of deterrence and defence and its planned measures, compares

2010 and 2022 Strategic Concepts, claims that, the latter has brought NATO into a new era of great power competition. The report prepared by Sean Monaghan et al. (2024), takes stock of allied efforts to strengthen collective defense in the face of emerging security threats. The report raises a critical question: while NATO may be prepared for the outbreak of conflict, is it adequately equipped to sustain and ultimately prevail in a protracted war? Based on Madrid commitments, The report assesses whether NATO is prepared to sustain and succeed in a protracted conflict. John R. Deni (2024) examines the rationale behind the launch of the new force model and outlines key elements of it, including force organization, force management, as well as command and control. Jacopo Maria Bosica (2024) presents the aspects of the New Force Model in order to highlight improvements and changes in comparison with the old one. The author claims that New Force Model can support the quick deployment capabilities of European Allies to defend themselves without necessarily waiting for the United States to lead. The literature review shows that, the prospects and challenges with the adoption of the New Force Model have not been extensively studied at all. This paper aims to explore NATO's

New Force Model and validate its implementation in the context of a constantly evolving security landscape.

2. OLD VS. NEW FORCE MODEL: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The new NATO deterrence calls for divisions and brigades that are less mobile and more resilient, with capabilities that can be used in all domains (sea, land, air, cyber, and space). The lightly armed infantry units that NATO formerly used as a “tripwire” on the eastern border and for its crisis-management missions in Afghanistan are clearly no longer in use. The deterioration of Russian land power in Ukraine allows Europe breathing room to bolster their armed forces and modify their industries against the backdrop of radically changing security landscape (Larsen, 2024).

One might question whether NATO needed to adopt a new force model, given that Russian power has been in decline since its involvement in a large-scale war with Ukraine. However, a stark reality must be acknowledged: no matter the level of preparation, armies with combat experience are always more formidable than those without. The Russian military leveraged

its experience in Syria to advance its objectives in Ukraine. Without these lessons, it is likely that Russia would have struggled to maintain its momentum against determined Ukrainian resistance (Hasan, et al., 2024). Therefore, despite its losses, it would be naïve to assume that Russia will remain weak in the foreseeable future or even in the long term. According to Global firepower 2024, Russia still maintains the second strongest military in the world (globalfirepower.com, 2024). The straightforward answer to this question is that NATO is now closer to direct conflict with Russia than at any point since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The perceived threat level is particularly high for allies bordering Russia, necessitating significant adjustments in force composition, defense budgets, operational planning, and broader foreign and security policies. (Iskandarov et al., 2025). It is also worth noting that Russia has doubled its military budget despite only experiencing modest economic growth (Hooker, 2024).

The NFM, introduced at the Madrid Summit in June 2022, is a major adaptation of the alliance's military structure in response to evolving security threats, especially after the war broke out between Russia and Ukraine. The model represents a

significant enhancement of NATO's defense posture, with a particular focus on rapid deployment and scalability across its member states. The NFM includes improvements in NATO's command and control structure to ensure faster decision-making and smoother coordination between member states. Back then, a large theater battle in the North Atlantic was thought implausible, and therefore the current NATO Command Structure is based on perceptions of Russia as a partner. The Command Structure is the backbone of NATO. It is composed of permanent multinational headquarters at the strategic, operational and component levels of command, distributed geographically and commonly funded. It offers the opportunity to all Allies to participate in, and contribute to, the command and control of all Alliance operations, missions, and activities across all military domains (nato.int, 2018). The New Force Model emphasizes integrated operations across multiple domains – land, air, sea, cyber, and space. This ensures NATO can respond to threats that arise in any domain and across geographical regions simultaneously. The new model involves a blend of national forces, which will be placed on high readiness, and multinational

NATO forces that can be deployed together.

By adopting the NFM, NATO aims to ensure its ability to deter and defend against any aggressor, maintain its technological edge, and guarantee the collective security of its member states. The model reflects NATO's commitment to rapid adaptation in the face of changing geopolitical realities. Rather than having to make a political decision to liberate occupied territory against a nuclear-armed adversary, this is essential for maintaining alliance unity during a security crisis. There is a risk of territorial loss from delays, since reinforcements from Western Europe would need to travel almost 1,000 kilometers to reach battle positions in the event of a crisis or conflict on its Eastern flank (Larsen, 2024).

The NFM represents a significant shift from its old force model against the backdrop of sweeping changes in global security dynamics. First and foremost, with this model, NATO aims to increase the number of its high-readiness forces to over 300,000, a significant rise from the previous 40,000 in the NATO Response Force (NRF). These forces will be ready to deploy at short notice in case of a crisis. The NFM will allow for a more flexible and scalable approach, meaning

that NATO can deploy different types and sizes of forces depending on the threat and the geographical location. This includes air, sea, land, and cyber capabilities. The NRF was relatively limited in size and scope, its deployment was slower compared to today's standards, with varying response times depending on the threat, although it included land, air, sea, and special operations components. The readiness levels were generally lower, with fewer forces held on high alert, and most units could deploy within weeks, not days.

Second, in the Old Force Model, NATO's posture was less focused on forward defense, with a greater reliance on a centralized force that would be deployed to different regions if needed. While the eastern flank (Baltic states, Poland) was recognized as vulnerable, there was less emphasis on positioning large, permanent forces or equipment in the region. The NFM significantly strengthens forward defense and deterrence, especially in response to Russia's war against Ukraine. NATO is pre-positioning troops, equipment, and supplies along the eastern flank (Baltic states, Poland, and other Eastern European countries) to respond quickly to any potential threats. This shift reflects the need to deter Russia and respond more rapidly

to any aggression in Eastern Europe or the Baltic region. The new model integrates pre-positioned equipment and infrastructure development for quicker deployment and sustainment of forces in frontline states.

Third, while the Old Force Model was more rigid and focused on large-scale, conventional military operations (less emphasis on hybrid warfare, cyber defense, and multi-domain operations) and NATO's response tended to involve entire units, with less flexibility for small-scale, tailored operations, in the New Force Model, NATO can respond with smaller, specialized units or full-scale forces, depending on the threat level and the specific region involved. The new model emphasizes multi-domain operations, integrating land, sea, air, cyber, and space capabilities into a cohesive force structure that can respond to modern hybrid threats. NATO now has a more robust system for countering cyberattacks, disinformation, and hybrid threats, with dedicated units and frameworks for dealing with these non-traditional forms of aggression.

Finally, since NATO's decision-making process has often been viewed as an Achilles' heel by its adversaries, New Force Model will ensure faster decision-making processes and a smoother flow of information between member states,

unlike the Old Force Model, where command and control were largely centralized, and decisions, especially those requiring the deployment of large forces, could be slow due to NATO's consensus-based decision-making structure. A notable historical example occurred in February 2003, when Türkiye requested NATO military authorities to prepare defense plans against a potential Iraqi attack. However, NATO faced deep divisions and one of its worst crises, as France, Germany, and Belgium firmly vetoed the request, highlighting the challenges of consensus-based decision-making (Edelman et al., 2024). The same scenario is never ruled out when preparing NATO for worst-case scenarios. New Force Model will allow for quicker activation of forces and rapid response in times of crisis, particularly in scenarios that require immediate action. NATO's new regional defense plans outline the necessary steps and resources to protect specific regions of Alliance territory from attack, while also fostering coordination and cooperation among Allies to ensure a unified and effective response in times of crisis. These plans provide detailed strategies for defending the Alliance, including the allocation of specific forces and capabilities and setting readiness levels. A key focus is on enabling rapid

reinforcements. All forces are pre-assigned to specific plans, allowing for a swift response to any threat. However, the successful execution of these plans and the credibility of NATO's deterrence posture depend on the Allies fulfilling their resource commitments and conducting regular exercises (Loorents, 2024).

3. THE NEW FORCE MODEL: FUTURE PROSPECTS AND IMPLICATIONS

According to the New Force Model, the Alliance will have a three-tier readiness system for the forces it will use to fulfill the requirements of the operational plans approved in the three sub-regions of Europe – the Arctic and North Atlantic, Southern Europe and Southeast Europe.

A Tier 1 force of approximately 100,000 troops must be ready within 0-10 days of the onset of a crisis or predicted warning. These forces consist mainly of so-called “in-place” forces, which include both national forces stationed in their own locations and troops from other NATO Allies on mission in an Allied country in crisis. For example, in the case of Estonia, Tier 1 forces include the Estonian Army and a NATO multinational battalion (NATO Enhanced Forward Presence) (around 1,400 troops from the United Kingdom, France and Denmark).

Tier 2 forces consist of approximately 200,000 troops and must be ready within 10 to 30 days. These forces are generally multi-domain in terms of capabilities relative to the lighter, rapid response forces of Tier 1. They are also division and corps level, unlike tier 1 forces.

Finally, Tier 3 forces number around 500,000 and should be operational within 30-180 days (Deni, 2024).

In addition to the three tiers, the new model introduces a crucial component—the Allied Reaction Force (ARF). While this flexible response force bears similarities to the former NATO Response Force's (NRF) Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), it would be inaccurate to consider them identical. Because, the VJTF in comparison was pretty slower to deploy than expected and was constantly accompanied by shortcomings depending on logistical challenges, political decisions, and member states' readiness. With about 40,000 troops NRF itself was insufficient to address large-scale crises, particularly in scenarios involving multiple fronts and actors (whose military capabilities could outpace NATO's response) or prolonged operations. The units assigned to the NRF had only been used for disaster

relief and security until February 2022, since its inception in 2003. Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) itself was created in 2014 as a measure of the Readiness Action Plan (RAP). NATO deployed high-readiness elements of the NRF for the first time in a deterrence and defense role by placing thousands of additional troops at high readiness earmarked for the NRF, ensuring that it continues to have the speed, responsiveness and capability to defend NATO territory and populations (nato.int, 2023). However, the VJTF was never “fully manned” because the Allies did not contribute it enough (Deni, 2024). It has consistently been perceived as falling short when it comes to the task of rapid deployment and effective employment during times of crisis. The ARF also differs from the VJTF in that it is truly multi-domain, incorporating capabilities in cyberspace and space. It provides NATO with a strategically significant, highly ready, multi-domain, and multinational force that can be rapidly deployed at the command of SACEUR. This enhances deterrence in both peacetime and crisis situations while also reinforcing the Alliance's defenses in the event of conflict. SACEUR has a central role in implementing NATO's military strategy and ensuring the readiness

and effectiveness of NATO forces. SACEUR's priorities typically focus on maintaining the collective defense posture of NATO, enhancing deterrence, and adapting to evolving security challenges. The authorities granted to SACEUR to activate and deploy NFM forces pre-crisis are critical for delivering the Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area. These authorities are not merely procedural but are instrumental in enabling NATO to execute its operational plans effectively. As SACEUR himself emphasized, such authorities enhance "NATO's ability to execute its plans and helps influence Allies to contribute their own forces" (Monaghan et al., 2024). Some experts, such as Sven Biscop (2022) and Jacopo Maria Bosica (2024) claim that NATO's New Force Model will provide the SACEUR with broader discretionary authority in contingency operational planning, thereby strengthening NATO's overall responsiveness and effectiveness. However, we deem that this process is not without challenges. A key obstacle lies in the reluctance of some allies to grant NATO commanders the "transfer of authority" necessary for optimizing and streamlining force deployments. This hesitancy often stems from concerns over national sovereignty, political considerations, or differing

threat perceptions within the Alliance. This reluctance underscores the importance of ensuring that NFM force composition aligns with regional contingency plans. Often, these plans may require specific capabilities or units that differ from the standard contributions allies typically provide to NATO. For example, a regionally tailored response might necessitate highly mobile mechanized infantry, advanced air defense systems, or cyber capabilities that certain allies are either unwilling or unable to supply on short notice. To address these gaps, NATO must work proactively with member states to build trust and foster greater interoperability. This includes establishing clear frameworks for "transfer of authority" agreements, improving the alignment of national contributions with Alliance priorities, and ensuring that NFM forces are flexible, scalable, and regionally integrated. A case in point is the transfer of authority by Naval Striking Forces NATO, assuming command of over 5,000 U.S. Sailors and Marines assigned to the USS Bataan Amphibious Readiness Group (ARG) (strikfornato, 2024). By doing so, NATO can enhance its readiness and deterrence posture while maintaining the political cohesion necessary for collective defense.

The ARF will be capable of performing functions supporting all of the Alliance's core tasks, not just deterrence and defense. Nevertheless, the focus of ARF training is likely to be on exercises for scenarios involving Article 5. The NATO Rapid Deployable Corps (NRDC-ITA), based in Solbiate Olona, Italy, will lead the ARF for the next three years (2024-2027). In preparation for this role, NRDC-ITA undertook a rigorous series of military exercises, academic research, and personnel training, culminating in the Steadfast Deterrence 24 exercise that confirmed it as the Headquarters of the ARF.

One of the most frequently asked questions in the academic field regarding NATO's force structure pertains to the number of units dedicated or contributed by member nations to the Allied Response Force (ARF) and its respective tiers. This inquiry often reflects a broader interest in understanding the equitable distribution of responsibilities, the operational readiness of multinational forces, and the overall capacity of NATO to respond effectively to crises.

For instance, Germany aims to increase its active armed forces to 200,000 and to contribute 30,000, or ten percent, to the high-readiness NATO Force Model and a

combination of 85 ships and aircraft mobilizable in 30 days (Tier 2) (Monaghan et al., 2024). Poland aims to increase its armed forces to 300,000 and is much further ahead in procuring new battle tanks, artillery, combat airplanes, and air defense systems that are necessary for the land warfare conducted in Ukraine (Hooker, 2024). The United Kingdom offered combat aircraft, ships, aircraft carriers, and "brigade-sized land forces." The United States has also placed much of its 80,000 strong forces in Europe under NATO command, the most connected it has been to NATO structures in decades (Monaghan et al., 2024). It is anticipated that, some other European countries, such as Romania, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania will increase their troop contributions to NATO's New Force Model, reinforcing the Alliance's capacity for rapid deployment and enhancing collective defense capabilities. However, nations such as Belgium, Canada, Italy, and Spain have been hesitant to meet the defense spending target of 2% of their GDP (Kennedy & Renken, 2025). Indeed, there has been a significant increase in defense spending, with a growing number of NATO member countries meeting or exceeding the Alliance's 2% GDP target in response to evolving global security challenges, even though there

are claims that U.S. disengagement could pose significant challenges for NATO in the foreseeable future, potentially affecting the alliance's cohesion, operational effectiveness, and strategic direction. For instance, in 2024, NATO members collectively allocated \$1.303 trillion to defence expenditures, marking a significant increase from the previous year. According to figures released by the Western military alliance, 22 out of 32 member countries met the benchmark of spending 2% of their GDP on defence. This record-breaking figure includes €412 billion spent by European members and Canada, 38% of which was dedicated to the procurement of major military equipment. The U.S. alone accounted for €720 billion of the total. Comparatively, in 2023, NATO members had spent approximately €176 billion less, reflecting a notable 19% year-on-year increase in overall defence spending. Traditionally underperforming nations such as Belgium (1.29%), Italy (1.5%), and Spain (1.24%) have each pledged substantial financial commitments to reach the 2% threshold. Canada, currently at 1.45%, also falls short of the target. Even some of NATO's principal security actors are facing fiscal challenges in sustaining robust defence investments. For instance, the United Kingdom (2.33%),

Germany (2.1%), and France (2.03%), while meeting the 2% criterion, are reportedly contending with budgetary pressures. The data further indicates that a considerable share of the increased funding is being channeled towards NATO's eastern flank, particularly the border regions adjacent to Russia, encompassing the Baltic States and Poland (euractiv.com, 2025). While the concerns remain speculative, the aforementioned developments are of utmost importance in ensuring NATO's continued strength and unity. Maintaining a robust transatlantic partnership, reinforcing collective defense commitments, and enhancing burden-sharing among member states will be crucial in preserving the alliance's stability and effectiveness in the face of evolving global security challenges.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

NATO, as the largest political-military alliance, has demonstrated resilience by continuously transforming in response to global security challenges. The introduction of the NFM underscores NATO's commitment to maintaining relevance and effectiveness despite claims of obsolescence. NATO's approach

to crisis response, deterrence, and collective defense has undergone a dramatic change with the adoption of the NFM. NATO wants to respond to a more complex security environment by optimizing force allocation, boosting interoperability among member states, and raising preparedness. In light of Russia-Ukraine war, the difficulties posed by hybrid warfare, and the increasing instability in some regions, the model reaffirms the Alliance's capacity to react swiftly to new threats. The analysis demonstrates that the NFM will enhance rapid deployability, scalability, and multi-domain integration, reflecting a shift from a slower, centralized, and rigid Old Force Model to a flexible and technologically sophisticated structure. By strengthening force integration, operational readiness, and adaptability, NATO ensures its continued relevance in an increasingly complex global security landscape, however, its effectiveness depends on sustained member-state commitment, interoperability, and equitable burden-sharing. The research examines the long-term implications of the NFM for deterrence, alliance cohesion, and transatlantic security. It highlights that high-readiness forces in NATO increase from 40,000 to over 300,000 troops, enabling rapid deployment

across land, air, sea, cyber, and space domains. Pre-positioned troops and equipment along NATO's eastern flank strengthen deterrence and reduce response times. Integration of cyber and space capabilities reflects NATO's adaptation to hybrid and modern warfare. Delegation of authority to SACEUR ensures faster decision-making, addressing prior limitations of consensus-based processes. Despite increased contributions, disparities in capabilities and defense spending may impede full implementation.

Ultimately, the true efficacy of any new model or concept is determined through practical implementation, and the NFM is no exception. Although this study addresses critical dimensions of the evolving security landscape, significant opportunities remain for future research to further evaluate its operational impact, strategic implications, and potential for adaptation in response to emerging threats. Future research should focus on evaluating the operational effectiveness of NATO's NFM, including the readiness, deployment, and scalability of its multi-domain forces, as well as the political and strategic dynamics shaping member states' contributions, burden-sharing and willingness to grant command authority. Studies should also

examine the integration of cyber, space and hybrid capabilities, the long-term implications for deterrence and transatlantic security, and the influence of emerging technologies such as AI and autonomous systems.

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