

I'm not a robot



Nato crisis management process

That program delivered. The scale of transformation and growth that NATO requires of allies means that the Alliance has, in effect, become a market creator, helping to give industry long-term perspectives about what it should deliver. This means something closer to Cold War levels of effort in terms of finance, people, technology, and industrial planning. NATO will not criticize any ally for investing in getting these basics right. As ever, the key levers for change are national, but NATO can help by being as clear as possible with allies and industry about the demand signal over time, identifying opportunities for collaboration among allies, promoting standardization and interoperability, and helping allies chart their way through fast-changing commercial landscapes such as the space sector. ACT, in conjunction with regional allies, is developing a maritime surveillance system for the Baltic that uses uncrewed vessels to extend presence and awareness. In particular, allies will need to grow their air-defense capabilities to meet the full spectrum of missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) threats; their ability to strike deep into enemy territory, overcoming the range of anti-access/aerial denial (A2/AD) and electronic-warfare challenges that poses; their logistics and enablement capabilities to ensure that forces can be deployed and sustained when and where they are most needed for deterrence; modern communications systems that allow decision-makers to act decisively and effectively across all domains of operation; and the ability to fight larger land formations (divisions and corps) in complex high-intensity operations. Drawing on history The NDPP is at the heart of shaping daunting change that will require deep and sustained commitment from allied governments. The ministers agreed on the joint procurement of a fleet of E3 airborne warning and control systems (AWACS). Defense spending rose and also contributed to a strong period of economic growth in Alliance nations, helping lay some of the foundation for the technological strengths of their modern economies. All need to step up in terms of money, industry, people, and the courage to embrace technology-driven innovation. Over the last thirty years, the NDPP asked allies to maintain forces for the contingency of collective defense while, in practice, the emphasis of operational planning and activity was on expeditionary operations outside of NATO territory. Maintaining the core However, there are ways in which this NDPP cycle has not changed from its predecessors. This is why, although the NDPP is formally co-led by a combination of Allied Command Transformation (ACT, housed under SACT) and the Defence Policy and Planning Division of the NATO International Staff, this cycle has featured much closer involvement from Allied Command Operations. It is a return to the Alliance's original DNA. The challenges in the Euro-Atlantic region over the last twenty years—such as terrorism and regional instability—have not gone away. Meanwhile, priorities for other allies will include the means to move forces, such as heavy lift trucks, railway wagons, and roll-on/roll-off (RORO) ferries. This does not mean giving up on more traditional capabilities. Why is this cycle of the NDPP so different from its predecessors? In every era, nations try to balance investment in proven military technologies with the need to adapt to the threats and opportunities of new technology and its tactical application. For example, NATO might have a template for an armored brigade, with a certain number of tanks, artillery pieces, rocket launchers, infantry fighting vehicles, and reconnaissance units. The challenge is ensuring that it has people with the right skills, experience, and training available in the right place and at the right time. Since the early 1950s, NATO has had three collective foundations for its defense. The demands on a flank ally, ready to receive and sustain deployed forces, are different than those on an ally that is deploying them and managing long logistics chains. As allies develop the interoperable forces requested by the NDPP and declare them to the NATO force structure, SACEUR will be able to exercise them more realistically against new operational plans, verify readiness, and drive improvements in interoperability and effectiveness through constant testing and learning. For example, an ally might be asked to provide a fully deployable corps allocated by SACEUR to a particular geographically defined role, with other allies asked to provide supporting forces or host-nation support. The first reason is that this cycle reconnects operational planning and defense planning in a way that has not been the case since the end of the Cold War. In other words, collective defense is more complex and more demanding—not just of militaries, but of governments and societies more widely—than the kinds of military operations NATO has participated in over the past twenty-five years or so, as difficult as many of those operations were. And it means being able to move, sustain, and support forces that might have come from the far side of the continent or across the Atlantic. Ultimately, those decisions are made nationally; NATO has no power to compel its members to raise taxes, spend on defense, or conscript their citizens. By the mid-1980s, NATO's posture and forces were considerably strengthened, not least through a series of major US and European technological and industrial programs that provided platforms NATO still uses today and were exported globally. But fair burden sharing remains a core principle. Two-thirds of NATO allies reached the target of spending 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense in 2024. However, the Cold War offers only a partial template. Defense planning, by contrast, looks further into the future and at a wider range of scenarios. In the secretary general's words, NATO must be "faster and fiercer." Therefore, the Alliance needs to draw from the past, make the most of its considerable strengths, and be inspired by the future. This explains why NATO is putting so much focus on industrial strategy. The Alliance's assumptions are based on the conviction that deterrence—putting enough doubt into the adversary's mind regarding whether it would prevail when attempting to threaten, coerce, or attack NATO—is the best and most cost-effective strategic approach when faced with a resolute, capable, and nuclear-armed adversary. In the 1970s, allies acknowledged that there was a widening disparity in conventional capabilities between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and they responded with what was then called the Long-Term Defence Programme. The ability to turn operational plans into precise requirements is a critical ACT function that leverages expertise and ensures consistency with operational plans. NATO helps allies in a number of ways, including its Rapid Adoption Action Plan for innovation, the Defense Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA) technology incubator, ACT experiments, and the NATO Innovation Fund. As current conflicts demonstrate, successful militaries need a mix of capabilities. New technologies can also provide an advantage by creating pressure on adversaries' vulnerabilities. Today we are at a similar point in our history—with NATO even deciding to procure a new airborne early-warning capability. This includes home defense forces, which were less relevant in the era of expeditionary operations but are critical to territorial defense, as well as outstanding modern warships, submarines, fighter aircraft, special forces, and cyber capabilities. NATO does not tell nations how they should approach sensitive questions such as the relationship between citizens and the state. This pushes allies toward building more resilience through collective logistics and allocating more forces to protection. The result is a dynamic relationship between operational and defense planning. Investment in host-nation support by flank states—such as accommodation, training facilities, and storage for munitions and fuel—is once again a critical part of burden sharing. But, as Secretary General Mark Rutte recently made clear, "we are not at peace either" and NATO needs to be ready for what is coming its way. Striking this balance is at the heart of the NDPP. European allies were critical to the transformation that occurred during the Cold War, at that time coordinating as the Eurogroup. Within that demand signal, the priority is the capabilities NATO needs to deter—those things that really alter an adversary's decision-making calculus. For example, the United Kingdom—which leads the NATO forward land forces in Estonia—is developing "Project ASGAR," a software-driven reconnaissance and strike complex enabled by combat UAVs and drones that aims to increase reach and lethality. That represents the lower end of the range of European allies' defense spending during the Cold War. They can allow for the collection and exploitation of data on a previously unimaginable scale, and the reaction of the effects of mass—for example, in fires, surveillance, or logistics—in very different ways. At the same time, NATO can leverage new technology to address immediate capability shortfalls or reduce the need for conventional mass by increasing precision or effectiveness. In many cases, the volume and pace of technology research and development in the private sector exceed anything that allied militaries are doing. Similarly, SACEUR can adjust plans based on a closer understanding of what allies deliver today and what they will develop in the short and medium terms. This approach seeks to enhance operational efficiency on the battlefield while ensuring cost-effectiveness. This pressure will feed into national procurement decisions, as allies give greater consideration to geography and interoperability with partners in specific regions or roles. NATO leaders will address how to express this changed level of requirement at the summit in June in The Hague. By the end of the decade, the NDPP will have significantly reduced the overall share of such targets borne by the United States. As important is that allies have in place the foundations to support those forces in a larger-scale and potentially longer-lasting conflict. But this reconnection of operational and defense planning allows for the NDPP to become a more powerful instrument for transformation. As SACEUR has noted, if one side turns up with a tank, the other side had better have a tank. This is a critical evolution in the defense planning process. NATO's logistics and enablement (including medical logistics and enablement) will likely be contested even before a conflict starts, targeted through sabotage, cyberattacks, and strike operations. The effort will not always look the same. NATO is not at war, and its deterrence is holding. Many of these platforms can be made more effective and will need to be better protected by the application of emergent technologies. Operational planning and defense planning are complementary in purpose. That mix will evolve continuously, sometimes month to month. All of that needs to be possible in an environment where the Alliance would certainly be subject to attempts at nuclear coercion, as well as sophisticated attempts to disrupt its information environment and the security of the territory (and maritime territory) through which its logistics and enablement flow. This includes some of NATO's strategic competitors, including China with its military-civilian fusion strategy and investments in a number of emerging technology areas that are on a par with those of NATO allies. They will be so again, supported by the increases in defense spending now seen across the Alliance (up almost 20 percent in 2024 for non-US allies). The conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East are doing just that. The second big shift in this cycle is toward the demands of collective defense against a nuclear-armed peer adversary. There is often no substitute for sufficient mass of artillery, protected mobility for infantry, air-defense capabilities, and other capabilities. This is the role of the NDPP and its antecedents. The former looked for heavier combat-capable forces with their own enabling capabilities; the latter for lighter and more deployable forces, often enabled by the United States. Over the last two years, allies have declared as available to SACEUR more than half a million service personnel at high readiness for the purposes of putting NATO plans into effect. If allies succeed in focusing their investments and policies to pursue this challenge, it will strengthen NATO's ability to shield its members, even if Russia and other authoritarian states continue to challenge the Alliance. As NATO works with allies on how they intend to meet the capability targets to be set in June 2025 at its summit in The Hague, allies are already presenting a range of transformative approaches that the NATO force will adopt in the next few years. (NATO handout via EYEPRESS) NATO's message to allies over the next decade will be clear. Overall, the Alliance aims to build about one-third more frontline capability than it has today, with significantly more of that capability held at readiness for warfighting against a peer opponent. Third, the revamped NDPP is driving allies to embrace the potential military edge that rapid adoption of new technologies and innovation can provide. But it is clear that the combination of needing to grow the overall force, modernize and stay relevant in the technological race, and, in some cases, address the effects of long periods of underinvestment will push most allies much closer to requirements beyond 3 percent of GDP. The third is a collective process for agreeing on and delivering the military means that the Alliance needs to fulfill the core tasks to which it periodically agrees in its Strategic Concepts. The good news is that NATO has been here before and delivered. NATO's Defence Production Action Plan, developed by the national armaments directors, sets out an overall approach. Fourth, NATO is looking to help allies as they find the people they need to meet growing demand. As a result of decisions made by NATO leaders at the Madrid summit in 2022, this NDPP cycle makes the development of forces for collective defense the clear priority. There is rarely a simple trade-off between old and new. Nor can one ally—the United States—continue to bear the main burden of providing such a wide range of capabilities for the defense of the Euro-Atlantic area, given growing alternative demands on the US force. ACT actively supports initiatives that strike an optimal balance between cutting-edge technologies and traditional military capabilities. It means enabling capabilities such as engineering, medical services, and signals. That is why this NDPP cycle will ensure there are no areas in which the US share of capability targets is disproportionate. Operational planning—the responsibility of SACEUR through Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and its subordinate geographic and domain commands—is a military discipline but always under the political control of allies in the North Atlantic Council. But planning and procurement processes need to keep up and become faster, more agile, and more flexible. By definition, it is both a civilian and military process, engaging national governments in choices about what they want to achieve and what resources—financial, human, and industrial—they are willing to allocate to do so. More of this is needed, and faster. This presents a great opportunity for allies to achieve effects more reliably, at larger scale, and more efficiently. NATO's successes over the last seventy-six years are the result of constant adaptation, and the Alliance is now going through its most profound changes since the end of the Cold War. Second, we are in a period of intense interstate competition between large states that are investing heavily in technology. Sky Fortress uses a network of acoustic sensors to accurately track and engage cruise missiles and other air threats. Russia is also learning quickly, bringing new capabilities to the battlefield with innovation cycles as short as twelve weeks. NATO's efforts to support Ukraine and strengthen its own deterrence and defense need to be seen as responses to long-term structural realities, not to a passing phase of crisis. However, this larger and more complex demand signal is not just about frontline forces. The second is a common command structure under the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), responsible for planning and commanding collective deterrence and defense operations. Allies also already have formidable capabilities available to them. The basic template for what is asked of allies, known as the Minimum Capability Requirement, was co-developed by both strategic commands. The first are the political commitments embodied in the Washington Treaty, particularly Article 3 (the promise by allies to invest in their own defense) and Article 5 (the promise to come to one another's assistance). Image: Flags flutter during a flag-raising ceremony for Finland accession at the NATO foreign ministers' meeting at the Alliance's headquarters in Brussels, Belgium April 4, 2023. Much of this vital support function will involve working with civilian authorities and industry, and relying on assured access to civilian capabilities—disciplines that NATO knew well during the Cold War and in which allies are now reinvesting. But today this process is driving the most consequential shift in European and Canadian defense in the last two generations. NATO's nuclear forces, particularly those of the three nuclear allies—the United States, the United Kingdom, and France—make a vital contribution to ensuring deterrence twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, and are all undergoing important modernization. All these shifts are happening while technological developments are changing the character of modern interstate competition and conflict very quickly. Flexibility to deal with the unexpected is an essential element of defense planning, and NATO looks at its neighborhood with a 360-degree perspective. Third, war itself shows what works and can rapidly change perceptions of the mix of capabilities required for success. First, it is increasingly clear that forces enabled by up-to-date communications and information systems—the digital backbone of modern defense—are now indispensable. Moreover, because NATO again has a military strategy for deterrence and collective defense, and a set of operational plans for putting that strategy into effect, this cycle can be based on a far more granular military demand signal. Third, this cycle must be underpinned by a serious push to increase not just defense industrial capacity in the Alliance—already tested by the immediate needs of supporting Ukraine—but also the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of industry and its ability to absorb emerging technologies at pace. Russia was successfully deterred and eventually unable to continue competing. In that case, provided that the proposition can be verified through ACT modeling and simulation tools, the NDPP can take it as the answer. NATO Allied Command Transformation and the NATO Public Diplomacy Division are financial supporters of the Atlantic Council. Second, whereas NATO has historically tended to express its ask of allies in terms of numbers of platforms or personnel, it increasingly seeks evidence of an ability to achieve a particular effect, recognizing that the "how" is likely to involve constant innovation. The application of technological advances in some areas—such as quantum computing, artificial intelligence, space, and autonomous systems—are also having more profound transformational impacts on defense. At the moment, it is accelerating for three reasons. Between them, they develop the planning, force design, doctrine, interoperability, training, and exercising that make it possible for national forces to fight as a coherent whole. The personnel models that allies employ vary considerably, reflecting national circumstances and traditions. But the Alliance has needed to reprioritize the threat of conflict with a revisionist, risk-taking, militarily capable, and nuclear-armed Russia, which has committed itself to a war economy and increasingly appears enabled by the technological, industrial, and economic support of China, Iran, and North Korea. A number of allies are looking to incorporate the highly successful, Ukrainian-developed Sky Fortress system into their own air defense. However, it is clear that urgent investment is needed to ensure that existing plans, as well as additional requirements that the NDPP captures (for example, support to NATO's nuclear forces), are adequately resourced for the Alliance to keep pace with Russian military modernization and expansion. Ultimately, with some 3.4 million people serving in uniform, NATO has the numbers. Issue Brief March 31, 2025 By Angus Lapsley and Pierre Vandier The NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) is little known outside defense ministries. So what has changed and why does it matter? The planning cycle, which comes to a head this summer, involves allies adopting capability targets that will shape national defense policies for the next two decades. Angus Lapsley is the assistant secretary general for defence policy and planning at NATO, and the former director general for strategy and international in the UK Ministry of Defence. It also means engaging the allied innovation ecosystem, helping it understand the requirements that NATO has at the Alliance level. NATO allies need to rediscover some of the disciplines and structures of the Cold War era—in particular how to fight together at scale, fight at home, and manage deterrence. The pace of military technological change is simply accelerating. Second, for all the scope for efficiencies through smarter, more agile, and more collaborative procurement—and for all the advances that innovation and technology offer—there is no way of avoiding the need for greater and more sustained investment in defense when the threat is rising after an era of relative stability. Ukraine and Israel are good examples of medium-sized countries with tremendous capacity for innovation. Ensuring the full participation of women in NATO's force is also a critical challenge. NATO's forces need to be larger, be better protected, have more firepower, be able to prevail in all five domains (land, air, sea, cyber, and space), be able to coordinate and harness all of that in a fully integrated way, and be able to operate across a NATO territory that is a lot larger than it was during the Cold War. Thirty years of globalization have created a very different world. There are no areas of capability in which NATO will need less in the future, and the Alliance will need more of some traditional platforms. There will be no rear-area sanctuary and no neat distinctions between sub-threshold (i.e., cyber and hybrid attacks), conventional, and nuclear operations. In doing so, ACT, in coordination with Allied Command Operations (ACO), will be able to develop an updated force mix, which will support future defense planning cycles and drive nations to innovate. This means stocks of weapons and spare parts, fuel, and food. The NDPP will still ask allies to retain some forces capable of out-of-area projection. Interoperability at large scale is even more critical than before. However, the pace at which change happens is not constant over time. But it also presents risks if adversaries are able to move further and faster to exploit these technologies. The NDPP cycle allows for in-depth revision of military requirements every four years to account for the evolution of these plans. In many ways, allies' force structures today reflect the tension between these two pulls. All of these changes are happening now and are bringing a different range of industrial partners into the picture, especially those from the civilian tech sector. Since 2002, NATO has also had the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT), responsible for shaping and transforming the force for the future. First, it requires commitment by all allies. Such planning aims to achieve specific goals using the military resources available at any given time. Within a twenty-year framework with regular revisions that allow allies to factor the effects of innovation into their acquisition and development plans, the NDPP can help in three main ways. (The most recent Strategic Concept, agreed to in 2022, set out three core tasks: deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security.) This process aims to be broadly fair among the allies, ensure that all are protected, and deliver an operational result that is bigger than the sum of its national parts. Third, as NATO communicates the NDPP demand signal to industry, the Alliance needs to recognize that this goes far beyond traditional defense industrial actors. Russia is not ten feet tall, and NATO's planning assumptions are careful to be realistic about the size and nature of the threat Russia could mount against the Alliance. However, an ally might look at the conditions and terrain in which the NATO plans require it to be able to fight and conclude that a different mix of vehicles, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), and fires—perhaps exploiting UAV technologies—is better able to achieve the required effects. The strategies that Russia and its partners employ, as well as NATO allies' social and industrial conditions, are very different. First, we are experiencing a period of intense innovation by the private sector—notably in the tech sector, but also in space—often with revolutionary implications for military capabilities. Admiral Pierre Vandier is NATO's supreme allied commander transformation, and the former chief of staff of the French Navy. NATO forces must also be able to both bring these effects to bear early enough to prevent a war from breaking out and, if war breaks out, to fight for long enough and in the right places. But the NDPP provides a collective framework in which the thirty-two allies agree on what they should each deliver, and by when. Instead of building forces for a range of potential scenarios across multiple theaters, allies are being asked to focus primarily on fulfilling roles earmarked to them under the operational plans. The May 1978 meeting of defense ministers, which approved this plan, issued a communiqué that could almost read as current, talking of the need to improve readiness, increase spending, increase reserves, address complex air and electronic warfare threats, ensure sea control and effective command and control, modernize nuclear forces in the face of growing Russian theater forces, and underpin all this with better logistics. The Alliance must be able to counter in those areas in which Russia has sought to build up asymmetric advantage. The Alliance's geography is more complex than it was then (if also more coherent with the accession of Sweden and Finland). NATO does not seek to mimic or match the way Russia fights. It does this by emphasizing the delivery of desired effects—for example, the ability to suppress enemy air defenses—and thus pushing nations to incorporate innovative solutions to meet their targets. We are also seeing an increase in the number of states around the world with the means to drive technological innovation in their militaries. However, there is much that allies can learn from each other as they experiment with the reintroduction of limited conscription, expansion of reserve forces, and schemes for attracting and retaining highly skilled personnel. The Transatlantic Security Initiative, in the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, shapes and influences the debate on the greatest security challenges facing the North Atlantic Alliance and its key partners.

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