



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

FINAL PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

INCREASING DETERRENCE AND DEFENSE
IN NATO'S NORTHEAST QUADRANT

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2026

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The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments is an independent, nonpartisan policy research institute established to promote innovative thinking and debate about national security strategy and investment options. CSBA's analysis focuses on key questions related to existing and emerging threats to U.S. national security, and its goal is to enable policymakers to make informed decisions on matters of strategy, security policy, and resource allocation.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report is the culmination of months of collective work on Northern Europe and NATO, and it benefited from the contributions of many. In particular, Dr. Dahlstrand is deeply appreciative of Jan van Tol and Casey Nicastro for their significant contributions to the project. Tyler Hacker and Madison Creery were vital in developing some of the research's earliest insights. Dao Tran contributed meaningful research, editing, and publication support, and Lilly Doninger and Luke Widenhouse provided graphics support. John Steinmeyer and Katherine Bloomfield helped get the project over the finish line. The team is also grateful to Thomas G. Mahnken and Evan B. Montgomery for their support of and contributions to the project, to Amb. Eric Edelman for his sage guidance, and to several other CSBA teammates—including Thane Clare, Greg Malandrino, Aaron Marchant, and Travis Sharp—for their ideas and comments. Additionally, this reported benefited from the insights of several unnamed European and U.S. colleagues.

The analysis and findings presented here are solely the responsibility of the authors. CSBA receives funding from a broad and diverse group of contributors, including private foundations, government agencies, and corporations. A complete list of these organizations can be found on our website at www.csbaonline.org/about/contributors.

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Executive Summary

The accession of Sweden and Finland to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has fundamentally altered Europe's security environment. Finland and Sweden represent the final pieces of NATO in the geographic puzzle of northern and northeastern Europe, connecting the High North with the Baltic Sea and covering the territory from the western shores of Norway to the alliance's border with Russia in Finland and the Baltic states. This coverage provides NATO new opportunities to increase deterrence and defense within the region and to impose strategic and operational dilemmas on Russia. Meanwhile, Moscow has not sat idly by; a reorganization of military districts and plans to increase presence near the Finnish border show the evolving threat posed by Russia in the region.

To best capitalize on the new opportunities and mitigate the emerging dangers created by the shifting security environment, NATO should embrace regionally-focused approaches to defense planning and adopt a framework that conceptualizes northern and northeastern Europe as a single comprehensive "Northeast Quadrant." Doing so would allow NATO to optimize its defense planning and maximize utilization of Sweden's and Finland's military capabilities and geographic position. Conceptualizing a holistic Northeast Quadrant and developing plans tailored to the region also provides a framework that supports European NATO members assuming a larger role in the alliance as U.S. attention and resources shift elsewhere.

The Northeast Quadrant conceptually includes the area surrounding the broader Baltic Sea from northern Poland through the Baltic states, the Nordic countries less Iceland (Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark), and northeastern Germany. This approach brings together two sub-regions that are deeply interconnected from a defense standpoint, but which often are treated as separate: NATO's northeastern front with Russia—particularly along the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian borders—and the European High North. The Northeast Quadrant as a whole, comprising both of these subparts, is a coherent region with a clear geographic logic and whose states share common threat perceptions, regionally tailored defense capabilities, and a history of cooperation. NATO members in the region are already moving towards a regionally-focused approach; NATO should capitalize on that

momentum and help optimize defense planning by treating the region as a single, holistic area of operations.

In the event of war with Russia, NATO has two principal military tasks in the Northeast Quadrant. First, it must defend the territory of every member state bordering Russia (and Belarus). Second, it must ensure the security of the High North by defending NATO Arctic territory and protecting trans-Atlantic and intra-European flows of forces, materiel, and supplies. These two tasks must be executed concurrently because Russia is likely to conduct simultaneous and supporting combat operations in both areas of the Quadrant.

NATO's current strategy for defending the territory of border states primarily emphasizes inflicting maximum attrition on Russian forces while reinforcements arrive from elsewhere in Europe and across the Atlantic. The effectiveness of this strategy, however, is being eroded by emerging vulnerabilities, particularly given Russia's demonstrated willingness to absorb losses and rising uncertainty about U.S. contributions to the alliance.

Swedish and Finnish membership creates an opportunity for a revised strategy that better balances attrition with interdiction and strike to defend frontline territory. First, NATO—and especially member states along the border with Russia—should create a limited but viable forward presence by prioritizing lethality and hardening defenses along the border to hold the line against Russian assaults. Second, the alliance must plan to neutralize anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities in Kaliningrad and implement a strategy of air and sea denial on and above the Baltic Sea. Third, NATO should expand its long-range strike capabilities to attack Russian staging areas, command and control (C2) nodes, and logistics behind the frontlines and impose additional costs on Russia, thereby rebalancing the region's defense strategy towards a greater emphasis on interdiction.

In the High North, NATO must be prepared to defend against Russian interdiction, incursion, and distraction. To defend against Russian interdiction of trans-Atlantic and intra-European reinforcement employing submarine-launched land-attack cruise missile attacks against major European ports, NATO must enhance its anti-submarine warfare (ASW) efforts closer to Russia's submarine bastion in the Barents Sea, invest in greater integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) around major European ports, and increase its situational awareness in the High North. On land, Russian forces could attempt to enhance protection of its defensive bastion or distract the alliance by attacking key NATO bases in the Cap of the North or seizing Svalbard. NATO can mitigate such threats by ensuring there is an adequate presence of quick reaction forces specially trained and equipped to fight in Arctic conditions that can respond to any Russian territorial incursions.

To further realize the full potential of the Northeast Quadrant, NATO should alter the alliance's C2 structure to reduce suboptimal and exploitable seams. Furthermore, NATO should support regional member states' efforts to more closely integrate their defense modernization investments, take advantage of selected outside actors, and leverage the competitive

advantages of its two newest members. For their part, Sweden and Finland must take continuing steps to further integrate into NATO and to optimize their contributions.

In the future, NATO could use the Northeast Quadrant concept as a blueprint for maximizing regional deterrence and defense while concurrently strengthening the overall alliance. A move towards greater regionalization in the alliance allows NATO to tailor defense to each geographic region rather than trying to implement an alliance-wide one-size-fits-all defense strategy and corresponding investment program. Regionally-focused planning also allows for faster, more operationally effective responses to Russian threats.

Lastly, the Northeast Quadrant concept could serve as an exemplar of how non-U.S. NATO members can contribute more to European defense as the United States begins to shift its focus to other parts of the world. The NATO states within the Northeast Quadrant can employ a range of deterrence and defense strategies—from deterrence by denial through forward defense and interdiction along NATO's border with Russia to quick-reaction forces and a greater maritime presence in the High North—that do not necessarily rely heavily on a significant U.S. presence in the region, though the United States must still play a crucial supporting role, especially when it comes to providing more high-end capabilities such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and nuclear deterrence.

Sweden and Finland's membership in NATO represents in a sense two final puzzle pieces being laid on the board, filling out and thus enabling NATO's Northeast Quadrant. Their membership lets NATO think holistically about this large region and to develop new defense plans enabled by the geography and advanced military capabilities that Sweden and Finland bring to the alliance. By conceptualizing the Northeast Quadrant as a single coherent unified area of operations, NATO and its member states can strengthen defense of the region and indeed of the alliance as a whole.

CHAPTER 1

NATO's Northeast Quadrant

In May 2022, just three months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, both Sweden and Finland announced their intention to seek membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In the years leading up to their decisions, few would have predicted the announcement. Although both Sweden and Finland had been growing closer to the alliance following Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014, their publics as well as most analysts and policymakers assumed they would continue their close partnership with NATO but refrain from alliance membership. Not only was their accession to NATO a historic change for Sweden and Finland as they ended longstanding policies of non-alignment; it was also groundbreaking for NATO.¹

Sweden's and Finland's membership in NATO fundamentally alters the way in which the alliance can deter and defend against Russian aggression in northern and northeastern Europe, filling in the missing pieces of the metaphorical "puzzle" making up the region. This important development comes as other aspects of the northern and northeastern European security environment are also shifting significantly: Russia has demonstrated its clear willingness to use force to change the European status quo and will assuredly remain a threat to Europe even after armed hostilities with Ukraine have ceased, whether temporarily or for a more extended period; NATO has increased its focus on territorial defense; there is greater uncertainty about the future U.S. role in NATO; and the war in Ukraine has demonstrated notable changes in the character of contemporary warfare.

These developments present NATO both significant challenges and opportunities concerning the defense of member states in Europe's northern and northeastern regions, including its newest members Sweden and Finland.

¹ Katherine Kjellström Elgin and Alexander Lanoszka, "Sweden, Finland, and the Meaning of Alliance Membership," *Texas National Security Review* 6, no. 2 (2023), <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/46144>.

How should NATO address this emerging security environment? This report argues that the alliance should conceptualize deterrence and defense of the northern and northeastern European region within a comprehensive and holistic “Northeast Quadrant” framework. By treating the Northeast Quadrant as a single unified area of operations, NATO can optimize its defense planning for the region, specialize regional defense investments, and ultimately make the region—and thus the whole alliance—stronger.

FIGURE 1: NATO'S NORTHEAST QUADRANT

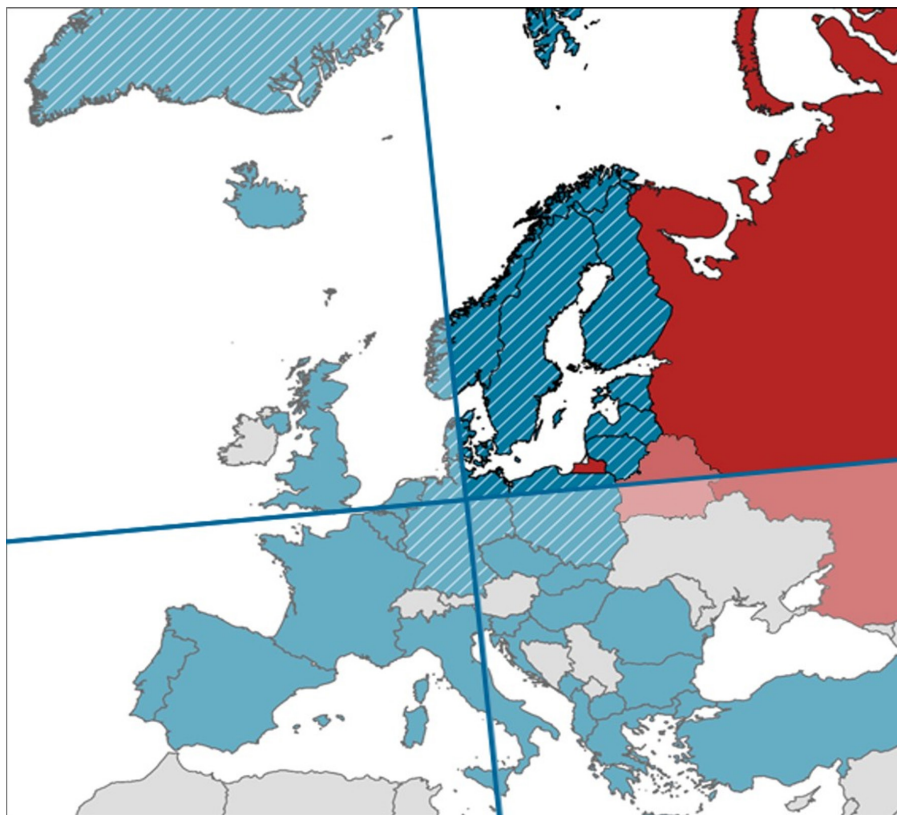


Image created by CSBA using QGIS and naturalearthdata.com. NATO countries are shown in blue, with striped countries representing those in the Northeast Quadrant. Russia is in red, and Belarus, as a close Russian partner, is in pink. Other countries are in gray.

The Northeast Quadrant, which includes the geographic part of the alliance that will remain the most vulnerable to future Russian armed aggression, conceptually includes the area surrounding the broader Baltic Sea and the European High North from northern Poland through the Baltic states, the Nordic countries less Iceland (Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark), and northeastern Germany (see Figure 1).² This approach brings together two sub-regions that are deeply interconnected from a deterrence and defense standpoint,

² As will be discussed later, the United Kingdom, though geographically not part of the Northeast Quadrant per se, also has important deterrent and defense roles to play in the region.

but which often are treated as separate: NATO's northeastern front with Russia—particularly along the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian borders—and the European High North. The Northeast Quadrant as a whole, comprising both of these subparts, is a single coherent region with a clear geographic logic and whose states share common threat perceptions, regionally-tailored defense capabilities, and a history of cooperation. The countries in the region are already delving deeper into regional coordination, and NATO should as well.

As NATO considers its strategy for the Baltic Sea region and the European High North, this report argues that it will be essential to treat the Northeast Quadrant region as a single holistic theater of operations. Doing so will take maximum advantage of NATO's new geography, the existing regional cohesion, and the region-specific capabilities that Sweden and Finland bring to the alliance. It will allow those states to invest their growing defense budgets efficiently, focused on a path forward that combines the capabilities that the Northeast Quadrant member states already possess with strategy-driven recommendations for what they could further develop and field to make them more highly capable “first responders” in the region.³

Developing a comprehensive, regionally-focused strategy to defend the Northeast Quadrant that prioritizes the role of regional states supported by selected member states from outside the region, such as the United Kingdom, with unique capability advantages will allow NATO and its member states to focus investments in capabilities that will have the most deterrence and defense value for the region. In this way, the Northeast Quadrant concept can serve as a framework for how NATO might regionally focus and optimize its defense plans and thus its investments to make the entire alliance stronger, even were the extent of the U.S. role in the alliance to change.

The New Security Environment in the Northeast Quadrant

Northern and northeastern Europe's security environment had already been transforming prior to 2022. In particular, after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, states in the region increased their focus on territorial defense, boosted spending on defense, invested in new military capabilities, and looked for ways to strengthen defense relations with neighbors in order to augment defense and deterrence in the region.

However, there was no formal framework or provision through which all of the northern and northeastern member states could cooperate as a group to enhance their defenses against the mounting Russian challenges in their areas beyond NATO's existing planning

3 Barry R. Posen, “How Europe Can Deter Russia,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 21, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/north-america/how-europe-can-deter-russia>. Posen suggests: “In their Trump-induced panic, European military leaders and pundits have spent the last few months talking about all the combat power that Europe does not have. But they have failed to evaluate and consolidate the combat power that Europe does have. ... Europeans, in other words, have combat power. To deter and defend themselves, what they need to do is consolidate that combat power and either deploy it close to the possible areas of a Russian challenge or at least demonstrate that they can do so in short order.”

mechanisms. NATO had a gaping hole in its northern and northeastern region, with non-aligned Sweden and Finland separating Norway from the Baltic states. Furthermore, NATO's presence on the Baltic Sea ran along the southern (Denmark, Germany, and Poland) and eastern (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) coasts but stopped abruptly at the Gulf of Finland and left NATO with no northern Baltic coastline and little western coastline (but for Denmark).

The situation in northern and eastern Europe in 2026 is very different. Together with neighboring Norway, every Baltic Sea littoral state except for Russia now belongs to the alliance. These NATO members collectively control the vast majority of the Baltic Sea coastline, with Russia having coastline only off Kaliningrad and at the far eastern end of the Gulf of Finland. The practical consequence is that the alliance now has ready access to virtually all Baltic Sea waters and airspace.⁴

These new geopolitical realities afford NATO an important opportunity to revise its planning for defending the northern and northeastern regions of NATO as a whole. They afford the alliance notable new capabilities and opportunities, and as will be discussed later, that can potentially ameliorate the biggest dangers that Russian threats posed to the alliance pre-2022 and potentially may pose in the future.

Russia's war in Ukraine has demonstrated the Kremlin's willingness to use force, incur serious risk, expend major resources, and sustain heavy losses to forcibly change the status quo in Europe. The war has also, at least temporarily, degraded Russia's capacity to launch territorial aggression against the alliance and northern and northeastern Europe. This provides NATO an important—though perishable—opportunity to recast its conceptual framework for thinking and planning by approaching the defense of the entire Northeast Quadrant holistically.

Developing updated defense plans and ensuring their feasibility should be a major priority for the alliance given the high likelihood of a revanchist and resurgent Russia once hostilities in Ukraine have come to an end. Indeed, NATO and the countries in the Northeast Quadrant have made several policy changes that help set the stage for a more optimized strategy for defense of the region but more remains to be done at a conceptual level. At the 2025 Summit, NATO member states committed to large increases in defense spending. This commitment represents a generational opportunity for NATO to enact a stronger, optimized strategy backed by member state investment in force modernization and a reinvigorated European defense industrial base (DIB).

4 That having been said, the characterization of the Baltic Sea as a "NATO Lake" may be an overstatement. See: John Deni, "Is the Baltic Sea a NATO Lake?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 18, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/12/is-the-baltic-sea-a-nato-lake?lang=en>.

NATO in the Region

Four main changes create the demand for a re-examination of NATO's approach to the Northeast Quadrant: Sweden and Finland's accession to the alliance; a greater NATO focus on territorial defense of Europe; uncertainty about the future shape of U.S. contributions to the alliance; and the changing character of war.

The biggest change in the region results from Sweden and Finland's accession to the North Atlantic alliance. Joining NATO disrupted the countries' longstanding policies of neutrality and non-alignment, driving changes in the two nations' strategic cultures.⁵ Although Swedish and Finnish armed forces had grown increasingly interoperable with NATO forces prior to membership, their accession to NATO creates significant new requirements for their militaries with regards to interoperability, operational planning, and investment expectations.⁶ In keeping with NATO policy, both countries will also be expected to take on new roles and missions within and outside their immediate region.

Sweden's and Finland's inclusion in the alliance also creates new military geography in northern and northeastern Europe.⁷ First, NATO can now plan on Swedish and Finnish involvement in military contingencies.⁸ Even prior to joining the alliance, it is highly likely that Sweden and Finland would have cooperated with NATO in the event of Russian

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- 5 Elgin and Lanoszka, "Sweden, Finland, and the Meaning of Alliance Membership," *Texas National Security Review*, Spring 2023, <https://tnsr.org/2023/05/sweden-finland-and-the-meaning-of-alliance-membership/>.
 - 6 On Sweden and Finland as partners, see, for example: Katherine Kjellström Elgin and Anna Wieslander, "Making NATO's Partnerships More Strategic: Sweden and Finland as Partner Models for Development," in *NATO 2030: Towards a New Strategic Concept and Beyond*, ed. Jason Blessing et al. (Foreign Policy Institute/Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins University SAIS, 2021).
 - 7 The following paragraphs draw from: Katherine E. Dahlstrand, "Achieving the Promise of NATO's New Northeast Quadrant," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 11, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/12/achieving-the-promise-of-natos-new-northeast-quadrant>. See also: Jack Detsch, "NATO's New Map," *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/07/27/nato-arctic-circle-nordic-countries-map-alliance-integration/>.
 - 8 During the Cold War, there was a concern that the Soviet Union would use Finnish and Swedish territory to flank Central Europe by invading Norway and Denmark, thus seizing control of the Baltic and North Sea. Christopher Donnelly and Phillip Petersen (1986) "Soviet Strategists Target Denmark," *International Defense Review* 19 (8):1047-1051 from *NATO's New Northern Direction*, 9; Director of Central Intelligence, "Soviet Strategy and Capabilities for Multitheater War (National Intelligence Estimate)," June 1985, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP09T00367R000300120001-2.pdf>. See also Bengt Gustafsson, *Det sovjetiska hotet mot Sverige under det kalla kriget* [The Soviet Threat to Sweden During the Cold War], *Försvaret och det kalla kriget* (FOKK) 12 (Swedish Defense University, 2007); Phillip A. Petersen, *The Northwestern TVD in Soviet Operational Strategic Planning* (OSD Office of Net Assessment, 2014), https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/Litigation_Release/Litigation%20Release%20-%20The%20Northwestern%20TVD%20in%20Soviet%20Operational%20Strategic%20Planning%20%202014.pdf.

territorial aggression in the region.⁹ However, the fact that they were not members would have hampered pre-war planning and interoperability and created uncertainty about the scope and timing of their collaboration.¹⁰ Now, NATO can more seamlessly plan and exercise military options enabled by Swedish and Finnish involvement prior to any conflict breaking out.¹¹ As one Finnish government report explained, “For the first time, the defense of this area [northern and northeastern Europe] will be planned, exercised, and implemented as a whole.”¹²

Sweden and Finland are likely to play a particularly important role in the defense of the Baltic states. The two states’ accession opens new lines of communication (LOC) to support Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The Baltic states, with little strategic depth, have traditionally been viewed as NATO’s most vulnerable front.¹³ In particular, efforts to reinforce or resupply the Baltic region previously had to flow primarily through ground routes that Russia could disrupt in key geographic areas, particularly the Suwalki Gap. Kaliningrad, the exclave where Russia has stationed multi-domain anti-area/anti-access denial (A2/AD) forces, posed challenges not only to NATO ground lines of communication (GLOC), but also air and sea lines of communication (ALOC/SLOC), to the Baltics.¹⁴ Swedish and Finnish membership in NATO expands alliance options to ameliorate the threats posed

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- 9 See, for example: Elgin and Lanoszka, “Sweden, Finland, and the Meaning of Alliance Membership”; Elgin and Wieslander, “Making NATO’s Partnerships More Strategic”; Anna Wieslander, “What Makes an Ally? Sweden and Finland as NATO’s Closest Partners,” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* (Springer Nature) 17, no. 2 (2019): 194–222, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42738-019-00019-9>. On Swedish cooperation with NATO during the Cold War, see, for example: Wilhelm Agrell, “Sweden and the Dilemmas of Neutral Intelligence Liaison,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 4 (2006): 633–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390600766056>; Matthew M. Aid, “In the Right Place at the Right Time: US Signals Intelligence Relations with Scandinavia, 1945–1960,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 4 (2006): 575–605, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390600766007>; Robert Dalsjö, *Life-Line Lost: The Rise and Fall of “Neutral” Sweden’s Secret Reserve Option of Wartime Help from the West* (Santerus Academic Press Sweden, 2006); Robert Dalsjö, “The Hidden Rationality of Sweden’s Policy of Neutrality during the Cold War,” *Cold War History* 14, no. 2 (2014): 175–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2013.765865>; S. Moores, “‘Neutral on Our Side’: US Policy towards Sweden during the Eisenhower Administration,” *Cold War History* 2, no. 3 (2002): 29–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713999963>; Magnus Petersson, “The Scandinavian Triangle: Danish-Norwegian-Swedish Military Intelligence Cooperation and Swedish Security Policy during the First Part of the Cold War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 4 (2006): 607–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390600766015>. See also: Jacob Westberg, “Säkerhet utan alliansfrihet. Svenska alliansstrategiers teori och praktik [Security without Non-Alignment: The Theory and Practice of Sweden’s Alliance Strategies],” *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 118, no. 4 (2016): 4, <https://journals.lub.lu.se/st/article/view/16436>.
- 10 See, for example: Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis, *The Role of Sweden and Finland in NATO’s Defense of the Baltic States* (The Heritage Foundation, April 2016), <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/the-role-sweden-and-finland-natos-defense-the-baltic-states>.
- 11 For example, Finnish territory has been part of the alliance’s family of plans since 2023, the year that it was ratified as a member. Ministry of Defence (Finland), *Government Defence Report* (Publications of the Ministry of Defence (Finland), 2024), 58.
- 12 Ibid, 20.
- 13 Jan van Tol et al., *Deterrence and Defense in the Baltic Region: New Realities* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2022).
- 14 Adamsky argues that the A2/AD concept does not reflect Russian thinking and suggests instead using the Russian term “Strategic Operation for Repelling Aerospace Aggression.” Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, *Moscow’s Aerospace Theory of Victory: Western Assumptions and Russian Reality* (CNA, 2021).

by Kaliningrad by making available added offensive capabilities, new reinforcement and supply routes, and expanded territory from which to deal with the A2/AD challenge posed by the exclave.

FIGURE 2: FINLAND-RUSSIA BORDER

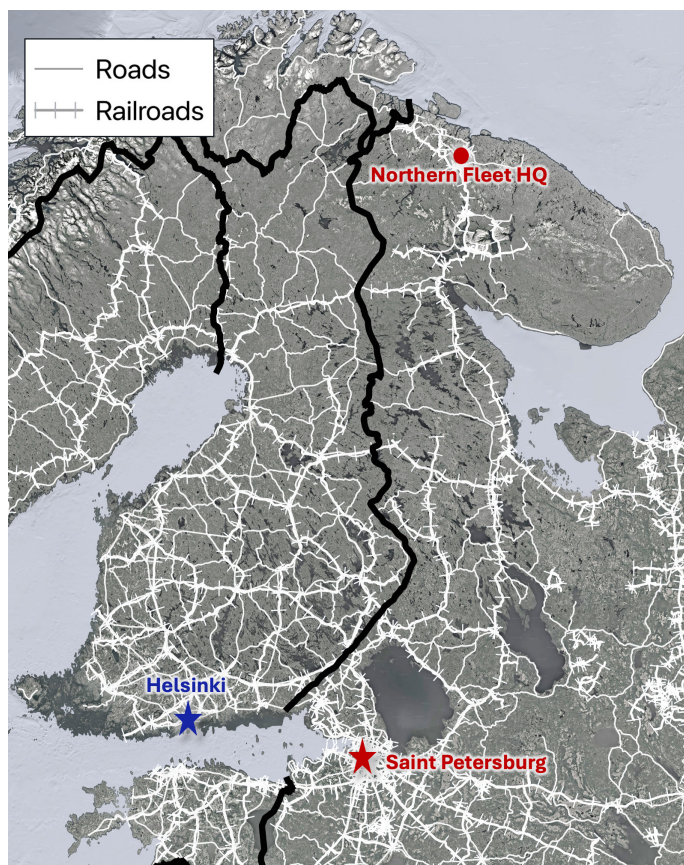


Image created by CSBA using QGIS and data from [naturalearthdata.com](https://www.naturalearthdata.com).

Second, Finland shares a roughly 1,340-km-long border with Russia, with its accession to the alliance more than doubling the length of NATO's land border with Russia.¹⁵ Although defending this border with Russia creates new requirements for NATO, the inclusion of Sweden and Finland in the alliance also creates new opportunities to impose operational dilemmas on Russia. For example, Moscow will likely commit more units and resources to defending the St. Petersburg area and the GLOCs to the Kola Peninsula that run parallel to the Finnish-Russian border (see Figure 2), perhaps reducing the concentration of forces

¹⁵ See, for example: Brennan Gallagher, "Bittersweet New Member: Finland-Russia Border Vulnerabilities to NATO," *Association of the United States Army*, July 14, 2023, <https://www.ausa.org/publications/bittersweet-new-member-finland-russia-border-vulnerabilities-nato>; Paul Kirby and Jonathan Beale, "Nato's Border with Russia Doubles as Finland Joins," *BBC*, April 4, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65173043>.

facing the borders with the Baltic states.¹⁶ NATO could also utilize Swedish and Finnish territory to increase potential vectors of attack on Russian territory, compelling Moscow to contend with both additional vulnerabilities and additional planning considerations. If Russia were to threaten more southern areas of NATO's eastern frontier such as Bulgaria and Romania in a future contingency, the alliance now has the option to mobilize forces in northeastern Europe to compel Russia to divide its resources and attention.

Importantly, Swedish and Finnish membership in NATO geographically connects the Baltic region with the High North, reinforcing both the need and the opportunity to think about the region holistically and shifting the political and military center of gravity of the alliance in a northern and northeasterly direction.¹⁷ The two states are both Baltic Sea states and Arctic states, and the Swedish and Finnish armed forces bring capabilities that are tailored to the unique conditions of both regions. They possess capabilities optimized to operate in subarctic and Arctic conditions with relatively little infrastructure.¹⁸ For example, Sweden's Norrbotten Regiment and Finland's Lapland Jaeger Brigade are specialized for winter warfare and ground combat in the subarctic and arctic regions, respectively.¹⁹ ²⁰ Both countries have maritime capabilities (such as *Gotland*-class submarines, *Visby*-class corvettes, and fast missile craft) specifically designed to operate in the Baltic Sea, which features archipelagos; largely shallow, congested waters; and distinctive salinity levels, with lower overall salinity than oceans but with varying salt concentrations across the sea.²¹ Finland, furthermore, possesses one of Europe's largest artillery forces. Both the Swedish and Finnish air forces have operational concepts that emphasize dispersal, with the ability to take off and

16 Minna Ålander and William Alberque, "NATO's Nordic Enlargement: Contingency Planning and Learning Lessons," *War on the Rocks*, December 8, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/12/natos-nordic-enlargement-contingency-planning-and-learning-lessons/>.

17 Caroline de Gruyter, "Europe Is Now Led by Its North," *Foreign Policy*, March 6, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/03/03/europe-led-north-baltics-nordics-ukraine/>; Henri Vanhanen, "Northern Europe in NATO: From the Fringes to the Forefront of Euro-Atlantic Security," in *NATO's New Northern Direction: The Evolving Role of the Alliance in Europe's North*, by Joel Linnainmäki et al., Finnish Foreign Policy Paper 11 (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2024).

18 Emelie Moregård, *Nordic Response 2024 - NATO Returns to the North in Large Scale*, FOI Memo no. 8504 (Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2024).

19 Swedish Armed Forces, "Norrbottens Regemente [Norrbotten Regiment]," Swedish Armed Forces, January 20, 2026, <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/om-forsvarsmakten/organisation/forsvarsgrenar-och-forband/armen/var-vi-finns/norrbottens-regemente/>. See also: Robin Häggblom, "The Cavalry Is Coming," Corporal Frisk, September 25, 2021, <https://corporalfrisk.com/2021/09/25/the-cavalry-is-coming/>.

20 The Finnish Defence Forces, <https://maavoimat.fi/en/jaeger-brigade-old>.

21 Scott Savitz and Isabelle Winston, *A Brief Naval Overview of the Baltic Sea Region* (RAND, 2024), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2111-1.html>.

land from roads and small runways—concepts that make targeting Swedish and Finnish air power more difficult.²²

Swedish and Finnish membership is not the only change in the alliance’s approach to and presence in the region; NATO has also become more serious about territorial defense in Europe more broadly, bringing new momentum to alliance efforts in northern and north-eastern Europe. The return to a focus on European territorial defense after years of out-of-area operations began in earnest after Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, with the alliance focused on reassuring eastern allies, increasing regional situational awareness, raising spending levels, and improving readiness.²³ The alliance also adopted new defense documents, including the 2019 NATO Military Strategy, the 2020 “Concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area” (or the DDA), and the 2021 NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept.²⁴

Efforts to increase NATO’s military strength accelerated following Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For example, in the months following the invasion, NATO allies agreed to increase the alliance’s forward presence along the NATO-Russia border.²⁵ In 2023, they adopted a new series of regional defense plans (North, Center, and South), the most detailed

22 Per Erik Solli, Robin Häggblom, and Anders Persson, “A Flexible and Resilient Nordic Air Base Concept,” *Luftled*, December 2022, <https://luftled.info/a-flexible-and-resilient-nordic-air-base-concept/>; Jan Henningsson, Natomedlemskapets konsekvenser i luftdomänen: Diskussionsunderlag för HS Luft och vägval stridsflyg [Consequences of NATO Membership in the Air Domain: Discussion Paper for the Main Air Study and Fighter Selection] (Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2025), <https://www.foi.se/rapporter/rapportsammanfattning.html?reportNo=FOI-R--5746--SE>; Barry R. Posen, “European Military Autonomy: What Comes First?” *Survival* 67, no. 5, 2025, 17–18.

23 NATO had efforts focused on the continent prior to 2014, but they were not widespread nor a core focus of the alliance. For example, in 2010, NATO adopted contingency defense plans for the Baltic states and Poland. However, the plans were assessed by some analysts as non-executable because they did not match available resources. Eva Hagström Frisell and Karl Agell, “NATO’s Return to Deterrence and Defense 2014-2024,” in *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2024: Part III, NATO’s Strategy for Deterrence and Defence towards 2030 - Matching Ambition and Capabilities*, by Albin Aronsson et al. (Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2024), 25.

24 The DDA is not available publicly. However, for information about it, see, in particular: Stephen R. Covington, *NATO’s Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA)* (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2023), <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/natos-concept-deterrence-and-defence-euro-atlantic-area-dda>; Sean Monaghan et al., *Understanding NATO’s Concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2024), <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/understanding-natos-concept-for-deterrence-and-defense-of-the-euro-atlantic-area>. The public NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept can be found at: <https://www.act.nato.int/our-work/nato-warfighting-capstone-concept/>. For one example of how NATO has buttressed its war planning efforts, see: Jack Detsch, “NATO’s Military Has a New Nerve Center,” *Foreign Policy*, February 28, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/28/nato-russia-ukraine-war-shape-command-center-headquarters-military-reforms/>.

25 NATO, “Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP),” accessed April 11, 2026, <https://lc.nato.int/operations/enhanced-forward-presence-efp>. For an assessment of the progress that NATO had made on its 2022 pledges in 2024, see: Sean Monaghan et al., *Is NATO Ready for War?* (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2024).

such plans since the Cold War.²⁶ In addition to detailing how NATO forces would defend allied territory, the plans and other NATO initiatives pre-assign forces to defend specific allies.²⁷ Whereas previously NATO's capability targets were understood to be fairly generic, the updated plans now allow NATO requirements officers to match the plans with specific requirements and investment priorities that must be met to enable the plans' execution.²⁸ In other words, investment priorities can now be identified based off actual plans, rather than broad capability sets.

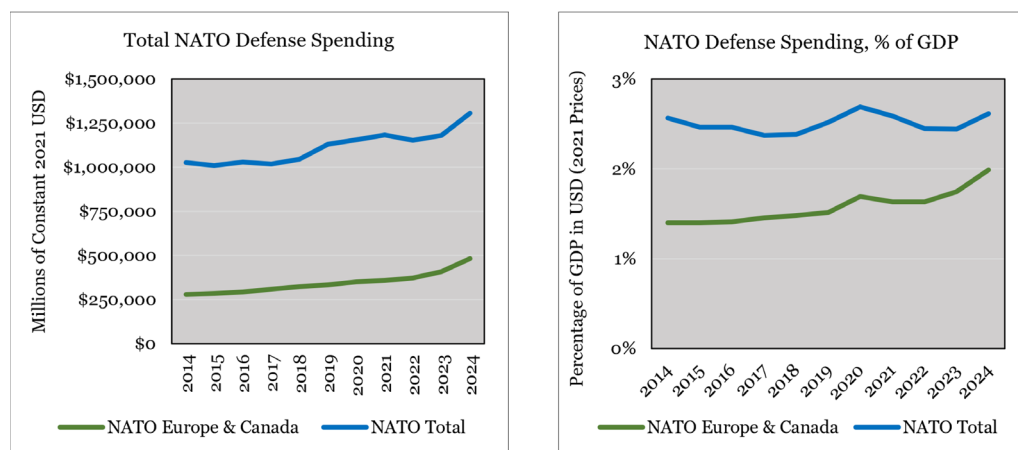
Alongside the development of new plans, NATO members are investing more seriously in their defense. The war in Ukraine exposed considerable weaknesses in European readiness, manpower, and industrial capacity, creating demand for increased defense spending and greater defense efforts to meet the Russia challenge.²⁹ Following a 2014 pledge to spend 2 percent of GDP on defense, in 2025 NATO allies increased that pledge to a total of 5 percent (3.5 percent on core defense needs and 1.5 percent on security-related areas) to be achieved by 2035.

26 Sabine Siebold, "NATO Reaches Back to Cold War Past with First Major Defense Plans," *Reuters*, May 18, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/nato-reaches-back-cold-war-past-with-first-major-defence-plans-decades-2023-05-18/>; Nele Looorents, *NATO's Regional Defence Plans*, Washington Summit Series no. 5 (International Centre for Defence and Security, 2024).

27 NATO, "Strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank," NATO, updated June 17, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/strengthening-natos-eastern-flank>. On the history of strategy- and plans-making in NATO, see, for example: Jakob Gustafsson and Robert Dalsjö, "Strategy-Making in NATO," in *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2024: Part III, NATO's Strategy for Deterrence and Defence towards 2030 - Matching Ambition and Capabilities*, by Albin Aronsson et al. (Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2024).

28 Albin Aronsson et al., "Allied Forces and Capabilities," in *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2024: Part III, NATO's Strategy for Deterrence and Defence towards 2030 - Matching Ambition and Capabilities*, by Albin Aronsson et al. (Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2024), 53; Bjørn Arild Gram et al., "Gram's Speech at The NATO Military Committee Conference 2023 in Oslo," September 16, 2023, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/whats-new/grams-speech-at-the-nato-military-committee-conference-2023/id2994317/>; Caitlin M. Kenney, "NATO Details Defense Plans—And Reiterates Call for More Member Spending," *Defense One*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2023/05/nato-details-defense-plansand-reiterates-call-more-member-spending/386220/>; Angus Lapsley and Pierre Vandier, "Why NATO's Defence Planning Process Will Transform the Alliance for Decades to Come," (Atlantic Council, March 31, 2025), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/why-natos-defence-planning-process-will-transform-the-alliance-for-decades-to-come/>.

29 In 2024, NATO officials identified six major capabilities gaps: air defense, long-range missiles, personnel, ammunition, logistics, and secure digital communications. Sabine Siebold and Matthias Williams, "NATO Finds Gaping Holes in Europe's Defences," *Aerospace & Defense, Reuters*, July 24, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/nato-finds-gaping-holes-defences-europe-2024-07-24/>.

FIGURE 3: NATO SPENDING ON DEFENSE

2024 figures are an estimate provided by NATO. Germany, a major spender, was not included in the dataset in 2025, so that year was not included. The percentage of GDP chart shows overall NATO defense spending as a percentage of all NATO members' GDPs combined, not an average of each country's defense spending as a percentage of national GDP. Swedish and Finnish data are only included from the year that they joined NATO. Data available from: NATO, "Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)," August 28, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2025/08/28/defence-expenditure-of-nato-countries-2014-2025>.

The increase in defense budgets (see Figure 3) brings opportunities for NATO to reduce capability gaps and to strengthen the alliance's overall deterrence and defense. However, member states risk investing in capabilities that may be useful from a national perspective or may satisfy budget requirements without necessarily plugging into an overall alliance defense strategy. Without coordination and direction from NATO headquarters, the alliance and its member states risk inefficiency, unnecessary duplication, or investment in capabilities that do not in reality contribute substantively to NATO's defense. Therefore, NATO headquarters should help ensure that the spending within the alliance is purposefully allocated, coordinated, and driven by strategy.

Another major shift in the European security environment is uncertainty about the future role of the United States in the alliance. The second Trump administration has highlighted questions about U.S. commitment and plans for future contributions to NATO. Much of this discussion is based on the recurring idea that the United States bears an unfair share of the burden for guaranteeing security.³⁰ This claim is not new or unique to the Trump administration, although this administration has more frequently and more adamantly framed U.S.

30 This critique is not new. See: Jordan Becker et al., "The Time for Europe to Step Up Is Now," *War on the Rocks*, May 17, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/05/the-time-for-europe-to-step-up-is-now/>; Michael Creswell, "A History of Vexation: Trump's Bashing of NATO Is Nothing New," *War on the Rocks*, August 22, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/a-history-of-vexation-trumps-bashing-of-nato-is-nothing-new/>; Steven Keil, "NATO Burden Sharing in a New Geopolitical Era," in *NATO 2030: Towards a New Strategic Concept and Beyond*, ed. Jason Blessing et al., with Rakeł Tideman (Foreign Policy Institute/Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins University SAIS, 2021); Kathleen McInnis and Daniel Fata, *From Burden Sharing to Responsibility Sharing* (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/burden-sharing-responsibility-sharing>; Valbona Zeneli and Philippe Dickinson, "Rethinking the NATO Burden-Sharing Debate," (Atlantic Council, June 20, 2024), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/rethinking-the-nato-burden-sharing-debate/>.

political and military support as conditional on European allies increasing defense spending.³¹ Other rhetoric and initiatives, such as seeking to acquire Greenland, have shaken other NATO members' trust in the United States. Homeland defense is always the top priority for any U.S. administration, but the Trump administration has signaled that its emphasis on the U.S. homeland and the Western Hemisphere may shift resources away from the defense of allies in Europe.³² Both the 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) and 2026 National Defense Strategy (NDS)—documents that set the tone for administration efforts but do not necessarily translate into action—emphasize burden-sharing and burden-shifting, especially within NATO.³³

It is not yet certain what these signals will mean in practice. Therefore, NATO members cannot yet plan on specific U.S. commitments. Elbridge Colby, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, for example, has suggested that the United States remains committed to providing the alliance with the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent and that the United States will “continue, in a more limited and focused fashion, to provide conventional capabilities that contribute to NATO’s defense.”³⁴ At the same time, he has called on allies to “step up and assume primary responsibility for the conventional defense of Europe.”³⁵ What exactly this means remains uncertain, and other U.S. domestic actors could limit U.S. force reductions in Europe. For example, the 2026 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) prohibits reducing U.S. forces below 76,000 troops for more than 45 days without first providing Congress with justification.³⁶ It also requires that the head of U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) remain dual-hatted as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).³⁷

31 On the connection between support and increased spending, see: Lynsey Chutel, “U.S. Says it Will Cut Troops in Eastern Europe,” *New York Times*, October 29, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/29/world/europe/us-troops-eastern-europe-romania.html>; Seung Min Kim and Mike Corder, “Trump Says Commitment to NATO Mutual Defense Guarantee ‘Depends on Your Definition,’” *PBS News*, June 24, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/trump-says-commitment-to-nato-mutual-defense-guarantee-depends-on-your-definition>.

32 “Remarks by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth at the Reagan National Defense Forum (As Delivered),” December 6, 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4354431/remarks-by-secretary-of-war-pete-hegseth-at-the-reagan-national-defense-forum-a/>; U.S. Department of State, “Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference,” February 14, 2026, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/02/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-at-the-munich-security-conference>.

33 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *2026 National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2026), <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

34 Elbridge Colby, “Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the NATO Defense Ministerial (As Prepared),” February 12, 2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4404801/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-nato-defense/>.

35 Ibid.

36 National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026, Pub. L. Nos. 119–60, S.1071 (2025), § 1249: Oversight of United States Military Posture in Europe, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/1071/text>.

37 For one analysis of the NDAA, see: Philip Bednarczyk et al., “The 2026 National Defense Authorization Act: What Europeans Need to Know,” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, December 10, 2025, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/2026-national-defense-authorization-act-what-europeans-need-know>.

Furthermore, the United States signed defense cooperation agreements (DCA) with the Baltic states in 2017 and Denmark, Finland, and Sweden in 2023, as well as a supplementary DCA with Norway in 2022, providing a framework within which U.S. forces can cooperate with and operate in each country.³⁸ How these DCA and other commitments may interact with any future reduced U.S. role in NATO is unclear. However—based not only on statements by the Trump administration but also a growing prioritization of the Indo-Pacific that has been present for several U.S. administrations—it is likely that the United States will continue to seek to rebalance the responsibilities within NATO (i.e., burden shifting) and ask, at the least, for Europeans to play the role of first responders.³⁹

Finally, NATO is also contending with new awareness about how contemporary conflict is fought, learning several lessons from the war in Ukraine. Primary among them is the increasing possibility of protracted conflict, reminding observers that short wars are not assured.⁴⁰ States thus must be prepared to fight long wars by ensuring they have sustainable

38 For the Baltic State DCAs, see: U.S. Department of State, “Agreement Between the United States of America and Latvia,” January 12, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/17-405-Latvia-Defense-Cooperation.pdf>; U.S. Department of State, “Agreement Between the United States of America and Estonia,” January 17, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/17-706.1-Estonia-Defense-TIMS-56237.pdf>; U.S. Department of State, “Agreement Between the United States of America and Lithuania,” January 17, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/17-227-Lithuania-Defense-Cooperation.pdf>. For the 2023 DCAs, see: Government of Sweden, “Agreement on Defense Cooperation Between the Government of the Kingdom of Sweden and the Government of the United States of America,” December 5, 2023, <https://www.government.se/contentassets/9938ae28ed8544d2b60b229e91fd0513/agreement-on-defense-cooperation-between-the-government-of-the-kingdom-of-sweden-and-the-government-of-the-united-states-of-america-date-and-place.pdf>; U.S. Department of State, “Agreement Between the United States of America and Finland,” December 18, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/24-901-Finland-Defense.pdf>; Danish Ministry of Defence, “Agreement on Defense Cooperation Between the Government of Denmark and the Government of the United States of America,” December 19, 2023, <https://www.fmn.dk/globalassets/fmn/dokumenter/nyheder/2023/-us-denmark-dca-den-prime-english-20dec2023-.pdf>.

In 2024, the SDCA between Norway and the United States was expanded to include a greater number of facilities to which the United States has access. Government of Norway, “Norway and the USA Agree on Additional Agreed Facilities and Areas Under the SDCA,” February 2, 2024, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/whats-new/norway-and-usa-agree-on-additional-agreed-facilities-and-areas-under-the-sdca/id3023830/>; U.S. Department of State, “Norway (24-610) – Amendment of Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement,” February 2, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/24-610-Norway-Defense-Amend-Annex-A-Supplementary-DCA.pdf>.

39 For calls for European allies to shoulder more of the responsibility for the defense of Europe prior to the second Trump administration, see, for example: Anthony H. Cordesman and Grace Hwang, *Strengthening European Deterrence and Defense: NATO, Not European Defense Autonomy, Is the Answer* (Center for Strategic & International Studies, September 20, 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/strengthening-european-deterrence-and-defense-nato-not-european-defense-autonomy-answer>; Jean-Marie Guéhenno, “Why NATO Needs a European Pillar,” *POLITICO*, February 11, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/why-nato-needs-a-european-pillar-defense-donald-trump-putin-russia/>; Daniel S. Hamilton and Hans Binnendijk, eds., *One Plus Four: Charting NATO’s Future in an Age of Disruption, NATO Task Force Report* (Transatlantic Leadership Network, 2022); “Obama Calls on ‘complacent’ Europe to Raise Defence Spending,” *Europe, France 24*, April 25, 2016, <https://www.france24.com/en/20160425-obama-calls-complacent-europe-raise-defence-spending>.

40 Stephen Biddle, “Back in the Trenches: Why New Technology Hasn’t Revolutionized Warfare in Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 10, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/back-trenches-technology-warfare>; Evan Braden Montgomery and Julian Ouellet, “American Defense Planning in the Shadow of Protracted War,” *War on the Rocks*, November 18, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/american-defense-planning-in-the-shadow-of-protracted-war/>.

manpower, large stockpiles of weapons and critical supplies, increased production and surge capacity, and societal resilience—areas in which NATO as a whole is struggling.⁴¹ NATO planners need to not just think about deterring war; strategies must also be developed for compelling an adversary to the negotiation table if deterrence fails. NATO is also learning lessons about the way that new technology—such as unmanned systems and military and commercial satellite imagery—affects the battlespace and the best practices militaries should adopt to take advantage of as well as counter modern tactics.⁴²

An Evolving Russia Threat

Just as NATO's opportunities and challenges in the Northeast Quadrant are changing, so too is Russia and its approach to the region. Russia's initial reaction to Swedish and Finnish membership in NATO was, to some, surprisingly muted. In advance of their membership applications, Russian officials warned of "serious military and political consequences" if Sweden and Finland joined the alliance and, in particular, if NATO infrastructure were built in the countries.⁴³ However, at the time and since, Russian officials also tried to downplay the effects of the decisions.⁴⁴

In subsequent years, the Russian leadership has announced a series of measures that will change Russian force posture in the region, presumably driven by the new security environment Russia perceives in the Northeast Quadrant. First, in 2024, the Russian military dissolved the Western Military District and created the Moscow and Leningrad military districts (see Figure 4). The Leningrad Military District (LMD)'s area of responsibility—covering the area near the Baltic states up to Russia's northwestern border—suggests a

41 Cathal J. Nolan, *The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *Protracted Great-Power War: A Preliminary Assessment* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2020), https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS-Report_Defense-Great-Power-War-DoS-Proof-B_2026-06-03-170038_efs.pdf; David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "America is Not Prepared for a Protracted War," *War on the Rocks*, December 4, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/america-is-not-prepared-for-a-protracted-war/>.

42 NATO, "Russian War Against Ukraine: Lessons Learned Curriculum Guide," January 2024, <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/deep/231208-RusWar-Ukraine-Lessons-Curriculum-Guide-en.pdf>.

43 "Putin Condemns NATO's 'Imperial Ambitions', Warns Finland, Sweden," *Al Jazeera*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/29/putin-condemns-natos-imperial-ambitions-warns-finland-sweden>; Lexi Lonas Cochran, "Russia Threatens 'Military and Political Consequences' If Finland, Sweden Try Joining NATO," *The Hill*, February 25, 2022, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/russia/595853-russia-threatens-military-and-political-consequences-if-finland/>; Andrew Roth, "Putin Issues Fresh Warning to Finland and Sweden on Installing Nato Infrastructure," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/29/russia-condemns-nato-invitation-finland-sweden>.

44 John Haltiwanger and Rebecca Cohen, "Russia Is Acting like Finland and Sweden Joining NATO Is Not a Big Deal after Repeatedly Making Dramatic Threats over It," *Business Insider*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-react-finland-and-sweden-joining-nato-2022-5>; Roth, "Putin Issues Fresh Warning to Finland and Sweden on Installing Nato Infrastructure."

view of the region as one strategic direction.⁴⁵ Putting the Northern Fleet, which had previously been an independent joint strategic command (*Ob'edinyonnye Strategicheskiye Komandovaniya*) under the administrative structure of the LMD also suggests that the Russian military sees this part of the Arctic less as a distinct theater and more as part of a broader northwestern strategic direction.⁴⁶

Understanding the Russian perspective of the region from a geographic perspective underlines why Russia may approach its northwest as one strategic direction (see Figure 4), which depicts the NATO-Russia border in a south-north direction for a view of the region as seen as a front from Russia. Second, the Russian military has announced the creation of new units, such as the 44th Army Corps (AC), and the growth of others, such as the expansion of an existing army corps in the Kola region into a full army and the 138th Guards Separate Motor Rifle Brigade becoming the 6th Combined Arms Army's 69th Motor Rifle Division (see Figure 5).⁴⁷ The Finnish Defence Forces (FDF) have estimated that the number of Russian military personnel stationed proximately to Finnish territory will increase from 30,000 to 80,000 when the announced reforms are complete, underscoring the seriousness with which Russia views the changed strategic landscape.⁴⁸

45 Karolina Hird et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 26, 2024," *Institute for the Study of War*, February 26, 2024, 26, https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment_26-9/; Juha Kukkola, *The Leningrad Military District: The Past and Future of the Northwestern Direction*, no. 35, Department of Warfare, Series 2 (National Defence University (Finland), 2024).

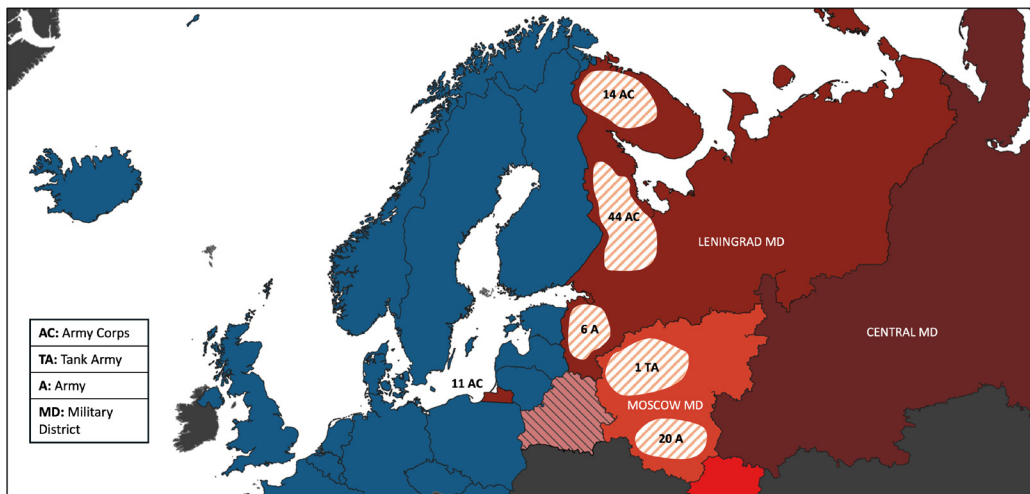
46 Troy J. Bouffard et al., "Russian Arctic Land Forces and Defense Trends Redefined by NATO and Ukraine," *Parameters* 55, no. 3 (2025).

47 Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, *International Security and Estonia 2025* (Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2025), 1.1; *Finnish Defense Forces, Finnish Military Intelligence Review 2025* (Finland, 2025), 12; Thomas Nilsen, "Finnish Military Intelligence: Kola and in Karelia Likely to Get Tens of Thousands of New Soldiers," *The Barents Observer*, January 24, 2025, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/kola-and-in-karelia-likely-to-get-tens-of-thousands-of-new-soldiers/423579>.

48 The Finnish Defence Forces, *Finnish Military Intelligence Review 2025* (Defence Command, Finnish Defence Forces, 2025), 12.

FIGURE 4: NORTHEAST QUADRANT NATO - RUSSIA BORDER FROM RUSSIA'S PERSPECTIVE

Created by CSBA using QGIS and naturalearthdata.com. NATO countries are in blue, Russia in red, and Belarus—as an ally of Russia—in pink. The map is turned 90 degrees to simulate a Russian perspective looking out onto the country's borders with NATO.

FIGURE 5: RUSSIAN MILITARY DISTRICTS AND MAJOR UNITS NEAR NORTHERN EUROPE

The areas covered by units are approximate and for illustrative purposes only. Belarus included in pink with diagonal stripes to more clearly distinguish it from the military districts in Russia. Image adapted by CSBA from: Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, *International Security and Estonia 2025* (Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2025), 1.2. Created by CSBA using QGIS and naturalearthdata.com.

These changes may not be the only ones, as Russia's full response to the new dynamics in Northern Europe will likely continue to unfold in future years for several reasons. First, Russian attention and resources have been focused on the war in Ukraine. A full Russian reassessment of and strategy towards Europe, and particularly the Northeast Quadrant, is only likely to emerge after the war has ended or come to a stalemate and Russian leaders have the time and resources to tackle new challenges. Second, the Russian government may be waiting to see how NATO members' policy, planning, and investments are implemented

so that they can be incorporated into any new strategies or postures. Third, Russian military reform efforts are driven not just by strategic rationale, but also politics, budgets, and personal incentives, all of which may change in the coming years.⁴⁹

Russia has several long-standing security interests in the Northeast Quadrant, driven in part by geography.⁵⁰ First, the Kola Peninsula is a vital region for Russian homeland defense, power projection, and great power status, given that two-thirds of Russia's nuclear submarines are based there.⁵¹ To allow the ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) fleet to operate survivably within the Barents Sea, the Soviet Union adopted what became known as "bastion defense," a set of interdiction perimeters to provide defense in depth and impose high costs on any adversary attempting to approach the peninsula.⁵² The Peninsula's major port of Murmansk remains mainly ice-free during winter in contrast to ports in the Gulf of Finland, thereby enabling year-round Russian naval access to the North Atlantic ocean and beyond.

Finland's accession to NATO means that NATO has much more territory fronting on the Kola Peninsula and the Barents Sea. In particular, the transit corridors that connect the Kola Peninsula with mainland Russia now run parallel to the borders of a NATO member, making

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- 49 Katherine Kjellström Elgin, *More of the Same? The Future of the Russian Military and Its Ability to Change* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2024).
- 50 See, for example: Ari Puheloinen, *Russia's Geopolitical Interests in the Baltic Area*, Finnish Defence Studies 12 (National Defence College (Finland), 1999); Milan Vego, "The Soviet Envelopment Option on the Northern Flank," *Naval War College Review* 39, no. 4, 1986, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol39/iss4/4/>.
- 51 U.S. Intelligence Community, *2026 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Office of the Director of National Intelligence (United States of America), 2026), 11. The Kola Peninsula houses the Northern Fleet, airfields, coastal defense systems, and ground units specializing in Arctic warfare. See, for example: Bouffard et al., "Russian Arctic Land Forces and Defense Trends Redefined by NATO and Ukraine"; Harri Mikkola et al., *Russian Aggression and the European Arctic: Avoiding the Trap of Arctic Exceptionalism*, FIIA Briefing Paper no. 359 (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2023); Mathieu Boulègue, *Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a 'Low Tension' Environment* (London: Chatham House, 2019); Colin Wall and Njord Wegge, "The Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War," (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-01/230125_Wall_RussianArcticThreat_o.pdf. The Kola Peninsula is also the western terminal of the Northern Sea Route, an important economic endeavor to the Russian leadership. For more on Russia's interests and strategy in the High North, see: Michelle Grisé et al., *Russia in the High North: Russian Strategy and Escalation Risks in the High North After the Russia-Ukraine War* (RAND, 2026), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3446-1.html.
- 52 See, for example: Kristian Atland, "The Introduction, Adoption and Implementation of Russia's 'Northern Strategic Bastion' Concept, 1992-1999," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518040701703047>; Mathieu Boulègue, *Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a 'Low Tension' Environment* (Chatham House, 2019); Mathieu Boulègue, *The Militarization of Russian Polar Politics* (Chatham House, 2022); Nick Childs, *Gauging the Gap: The Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap – A Strategic Assessment* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022); Jonas Kjellén, "The Russian Northern Fleet Bastion Revisited," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* Special Issue 2025 (2025). See also: Jan S. Breemer, "The Soviet Navy's SSBN Bastions: Evidence, Inference, and Alternative Scenarios," *RUSI Journal* 130, no. 1 (1985): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071848508522717>; Jessica Montgomery Huckabey, *Sea Power Rivalry: The Influence of Admiral Gorshkov on American Naval Thought, 1963-1985* (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2018); Stephen M. Walt, *Analysts in War and Peace: McGwire, McConnell, and Admiral Gorshkov*, Professional Paper 458 (Arlington, VA: CNA, 1987); Robert G. Weinland, Michael K. McGwire, and James M. McConnell, *Admiral Gorshkov on "Navies in War and Peace"* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 1974).

them potentially vulnerable to attack. Furthermore, with Finland's accession, the NATO-Russia border is just 200 km from St. Petersburg, putting it within easy range of NATO weapon systems placed in Finland.

Second, the Baltic Sea is a key trade route for the Russian economy. St. Petersburg is Russia's busiest seaport, handling a significant portion of Russian imports and exports, and the Baltic Sea serves as the primary export route for Russian crude oil. The Russian 'shadow fleet' of false-flagged tankers continues to operate in the Baltic Sea, and Ukrainian strikes on Russia's Baltic Sea oil terminals underscore the vulnerability of the area.⁵³ With Sweden and Finland's membership, NATO member states now control the Danish Straits and the Gulf of Finland, key chokepoints along Russian trade routes in the Baltic Sea.

Third, the Kaliningrad exclave presents both opportunities and vulnerabilities for Russia.⁵⁴ Kaliningrad is home to Russia's only year-round ice-free port on the Baltic Sea, the port of Baltiysk, which hosts most of the Baltic Fleet.⁵⁵ Before Sweden and Finland joined NATO, there was significant policy discussion about how Kaliningrad could play a formidable role in enforcing a Russian A2/AD bubble over the Baltic states and the Baltic Sea.⁵⁶ Now, rather than Kaliningrad being a Russian "cork" in the bottle blocking (or at a minimum complicating) NATO reinforcements, it may now be thought of as a Russian island, surrounded by a sea of NATO member states. Thus, while capabilities sited in Kaliningrad will still menace NATO operations in the region, Russia may face greater difficulties in resupplying the exclave.

Given these considerations, Swedish and Finnish alliance membership, increased NATO focus on deterrence and defense, and augmented NATO spending all create a more

53 Charlie Edwards, "Europe's Coastal States Tighten Enforcement on Russia's Shadow Fleet," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, March 9, 2026, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2026/03/europes-coastal-states-tighten-enforcement-on-russias-shadow-fleet/>; Meelis Oidsalu, "Why Russia's Shadow Fleet Sails Unhindered," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, December 18, 2025, <https://cepa.org/article/why-russias-shadow-fleet-sails-unhindered/>; PIZ Marine, "Baltic Sea: The Security Risk Posed by Russia's Shadow Fleet," *Bundeswehr*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/baltic-sea-russia-s-shadow-fleet-5892544>; Vaibhav Raghunandan, Luke Wickenden, and Panda Rushwood, "February 2026 – Monthly Analysis of Russian Fossil Fuel Exports and Sanctions," *Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air*, March 12, 2026, <https://energyandcleanair.org/february-2026-monthly-analysis-of-russian-fossil-fuel-exports-and-sanctions/>. On Ukraine's actions, see, for example: David Kirichenko, "Ukraine Bombs Russia's Baltic Ports as Zelenskyy Targets Putin's Oil Exports," (Atlantic Council, March 31, 2026), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraine-bombs-russias-baltic-ports-as-zelenskyy-targets-putins-oil-exports/>.

54 On Kaliningrad, see, for example: Thomas Grove, "Tiny Russian Exclave Flexes Might in NATO's Backyard," *Wall Street Journal*, April 18, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/tiny-russian-exclave-flexes-might-in-natos-backyard-d4a88eb8>; Konrad Muzyka, *Russian Forces in the Western Military District* (CNA, 2021), 42–51; Sergey Sukhankin, "David vs. Goliath: Kaliningrad Oblast as Russia's A2/AD 'Bubble,'" *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019); Steve Wills, "Kaliningrad: Impregnable Fortress or 'Russian Alamo'?", CNA, May 15, 2023, <https://www.cna.org/our-media/indepth/2023/05/kaliningrad-impregnable-fortress-or-russian-alamo>.

55 Paolo Pizzolo, "The Strategic Relevance of Kaliningrad," *Proceedings* 150, no. 10, October 2024, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/october/strategic-relevance-kaliningrad>.

56 See, for example: Sergey Sukhankin, "David vs. Goliath: Kaliningrad Oblast as Russia's A2/AD 'Bubble,'" *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019).

challenging security environment for Russia. Although Russia's primary focus is currently on Ukraine, as it seeks to rebuild its armed forces it is likely to emphasize the geographic areas facing NATO, particularly the Northeast Quadrant. In so doing, Russia is likely to bolster defenses and increase military units along the Russia-NATO and Russia-Ukraine borders, including more air defense assets, measures to protect and expand the ground lines of communication from St. Petersburg running north along the Kola Peninsula, and additional military infrastructure.⁵⁷ Russia is also likely to try to use Belarus, its ally and de facto satellite, as a tool to threaten the region, including by placing additional Russian military capabilities in the country.⁵⁸

In the High North, Russia may increase defenses on the Kola Peninsula, double down on its bastion strategy, and/or seek additional ways to secure its nuclear second-strike capability. In the Baltic Sea, Kaliningrad's newfound vulnerability could motivate Russia to find renewed opportunities to access Baltic coastlines and/or to ensure its maritime supply lines are not threatened, seek new ways to deter regional states from striking at Kaliningrad (including threats of nuclear use and missile strikes), prioritize the rapid neutralization and seizure of key coastal areas and islands (including Gotland off the southeastern coast of Sweden and Åland at the base of the Gulf of Bothnia) on which to place Russian air defense and strike assets during times of conflict, and/or build a "land bridge" to Kaliningrad from mainland Russia.

In addition to altering its force posture and possibly engaging in kinetic action, Russia is likely to continue to conduct hybrid activities within the Northeast Quadrant. Russia currently employs a wide range of asymmetric methods, based in part on a long history of what Russian and Soviet thought labeled "active measures."⁵⁹ Hybrid operations range from activities like information operations to cyberattacks, sabotage, air incursions, and GPS jamming.⁶⁰ The Northeast Quadrant states have been repeated targets of Russian hybrid

57 Russia is already constructing new rail along its borders with Finland and Norway, as well as between St. Petersburg and the Estonian border. Thomas Grove, "The Russian Military Moves That Have Europe on Edge," *Wall Street Journal*, April 27, 2025.

58 This report focuses on the threat from Russia itself, although Russian assets in Belarus as well as Belarus itself must be considered, especially in the context of defense of the Baltic states.

59 Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

60 NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence has identified twelve kinds of hybrid threats, from economic leverage to interference in elections, and sometimes individual below-threshold influence actions are not visible "because it often looks like the normal bustle of daily life." Pia Hansen and Monika Gill, *Strategic Communications Hybrid Threats Toolkit* (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2021), <https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/?file=/publications/download/Strategic-Communications-Hybrid-Threats-Toolkit.pdf?zoom=page-fit>.

operations, with each member state affected.⁶¹ One database tracking physical attacks on European states from February 2022 to mid-January 2026 suggests that two-thirds of the nearly 150 noted attacks in Europe affected countries within the Northeast Quadrant.⁶² Another think tank's tracking of sub-threshold activities since 2022 suggests that incidents within the Northeast Quadrant countries represented more than half of all such incidents in Europe, as of early April 2026.⁶³ According to this data, Northeast Quadrant countries were the targets or location of more than 76 percent of European sabotage incidents and 63 percent of European airspace incidents.⁶⁴

These attacks are becoming the baseline of peacetime activity rather than episodic incidents.⁶⁵ Russia is likely to continue to conduct hybrid activities in an attempt to shape public opinion and decision-making within NATO and the members of the Northeast Quadrant.⁶⁶ It furthermore may use the activities to learn about NATO's and members' vulnerabilities and possible response patterns to a wide range of attacks, allowing Russia to apply that information to future attacks.⁶⁷

Opportunities and Challenges for NATO

With Russia likely to remain a threat to the Northeast Quadrant and with the military geography of the region shifting, NATO is in a unique position to shape the future security of the region. Swedish and Finnish membership fundamentally changes NATO's position within the Quadrant, bringing both new challenges and new opportunities. What NATO and its

61 Minna Ålander and Patrik Oksanen (eds), *Tracking the Russian Hybrid Warfare* (Stockholm: Frivärld, 2024), <https://frivärld.se/rapporter/tracking-the-russian-hybrid-warfare-cases-from-nordic-baltic-countries/l>; Richard Milne et al., "Inside Russia's Shadow War in the Baltics," *Financial Times*, March 10, 2025, <https://ig.ft.com/baltic-sea/>; Tony Lawrence et al., *Hybrid and High-End Warfare in the Baltic Sea Region: Safeguarding our Maritime Domain* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2025), <https://icds.ee/en/hybrid-and-high-end-warfare-in-the-baltic-sea-region-safeguarding-our-maritime-domain/>; Charlie Edwards and Nate Seidenstein, *The Scale of Russian Sabotage Operations Against Europe's Critical Infrastructure* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, August 19, 2025).

62 CSBA counted incidents that occurred in the North Sea, Baltic Sea, or individual Northeast Quadrant members (Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, or Sweden). Incidents with multiple locations were counted only once. As a result, 98 of 146 recorded incidents were tagged as occurring in the Northeast Quadrant. Bart Schuurman, "Russian Operations Against Europe Dataset," Harvard Dataverse, January 12, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/TQoFMQ>.

63 The Everywhere War: Sub-Threshold Warfare Tracker," *Sahaidachnyi Security Center*, accessed April 6, 2026, <https://sahasec.org/tracker/>.

64 *Sahaidachnyi Security Center*, "The Everywhere War: Sub-Threshold Warfare Tracker."

65 David Cattler, *Signals from the North: What Nordic and Baltic Intelligence Assessments Reveal About Russia* (Tallinn, Estonia: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2026), <https://icds.ee/en/signals-from-the-north-what-nordic-and-baltic-intelligence-assessments-reveal-about-russia/>.

66 For examples of the effects that hybrid operations could hold and Russian motivations, see, for example: Edwards and Seidenstein, *The Scale of Russian Sabotage Operations*; Seth G. Jones, *Russia's Shadow War Against the West*, CSIS Briefs (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2025).

67 Keir Giles, "What is Russia Up To in Europe?" *Foreign Policy*, February 24, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/24/russia-sabotage-cyber-energy-attacks-europe-nato/>.

member states do in the next few years may shape the defensive strength of the region for years to come.

Report Organization

This report, in proposing that NATO utilize a holistic Northeast Quadrant concept to enhance deterrence and defense in the alliance's northern and northeastern region, makes an argument for NATO to adopt more regionally- or geographically-focused defense planning. The subsequent chapters demonstrate how applying a regionally-focused approach to the Northeast Quadrant region could enhance this vulnerable region's deterrence and defense against Russian aggression.

Chapter 2 examines how and why the concept of the Northeast Quadrant is necessary and analytically useful for the region. Chapters 3 and 4 then examine the two primary military challenges NATO faces in the Northeast Quadrant: defending the Quadrant's border with Russia (Chapter 3) and protecting the High North and defending against threats that could emerge from it (Chapter 4). In so doing, the report develops strategies and derives requirements for NATO and Northeast Quadrant member states for key missions and tasks. Chapter 5 addresses the benefits and the traditional concerns regarding a shift to a regionally-focused approach to NATO defense in the Quadrant.

Chapter 6 sums up the case for a Northeast Quadrant planning framework and reprises the main considerations for maximizing its potential. It then briefly discusses how the Quadrant concept can help ameliorate certain implications of potential reduced future U.S. contributions to NATO. It concludes finally that Sweden and Finland's membership in NATO fills in the last puzzle pieces for the region by enabling NATO to conceptualize this part of Europe as one single, comprehensive area of operations to reinforce deterrence and defense within NATO's most vulnerable region and thereby strengthen the security of the alliance as a whole.

CHAPTER 2

Conceptualizing the Northeast Quadrant Operationally

When Sweden and Finland first joined NATO, there was considerable debate about under which joint operational level command they would be placed: Allied Joint Force Command (JFC) Brunssum or Allied Joint Force Command Norfolk.⁶⁸ JFC Brunssum's area of responsibility (AOR) runs from the Alps to the Baltic region, with a consequent primary focus on NATO's eastern border with Russia, while JFC Norfolk's AOR covers the Atlantic region and the European High North (see Figure 6).⁶⁹

On the one hand, arguments for their placement under JFC Brunssum emphasized that Sweden and Finland would be critical to the defense of NATO's northeastern border with Russia. Sweden's military forces and geography could help mitigate the serious logistics and sustainment challenges entailed in reinforcing and resupplying Baltic states if attacked by Russia, a scenario which had long been considered the most dangerous and difficult situation that NATO could face. In addition to the military capabilities Finland brings to the alliance, it has more than half of the alliance's collective border with Russia. Thus, Sweden and Finland, the argument held, should be focused primarily eastwardly for purposes of alliance deterrence and defense efforts and hence fall under JFC Brunssum.

68 Dan Baer and Sophia Besch, "The Logistical Challenge of Integrating Sweden and Finland Into NATO," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 28, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/05/jfc-nato-sweden-finland-norfolk-brunssum>; Tony Lawrence and Tomas Jermalavičius, *Finland and Sweden in NATO*, with Jan Hyllander (International Centre for Defence and Security, 2024), 32; YLE News, "Finland Joins Nato's Brunssum HQ in the Netherlands," *Yle News*, May 24, 2023, <https://yle.fi/a/74-20033236>.

69 On NATO's regional plans and the JFCs' areas of responsibility, see, for example: "NATO is Drafting New Plans to Defend Europe," *The Economist*, July 2, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/international/2023/07/02/nato-is-drafting-new-plans-to-defend-europe>; NATO, "Media Briefing with the Chair of the NATO Military Committee, Admiral Rob Bauer and SHAPE Deputy Chief of Staff Operations, Major General Matthew Van Wagenen," July 3, 2023, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2023/07/03/media-briefing>; Albin Aronsson et al., *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2024: Part III, NATO's Strategy for Deterrence and Defence towards 2030 - Matching Ambition and Capabilities* (Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2024), 53.

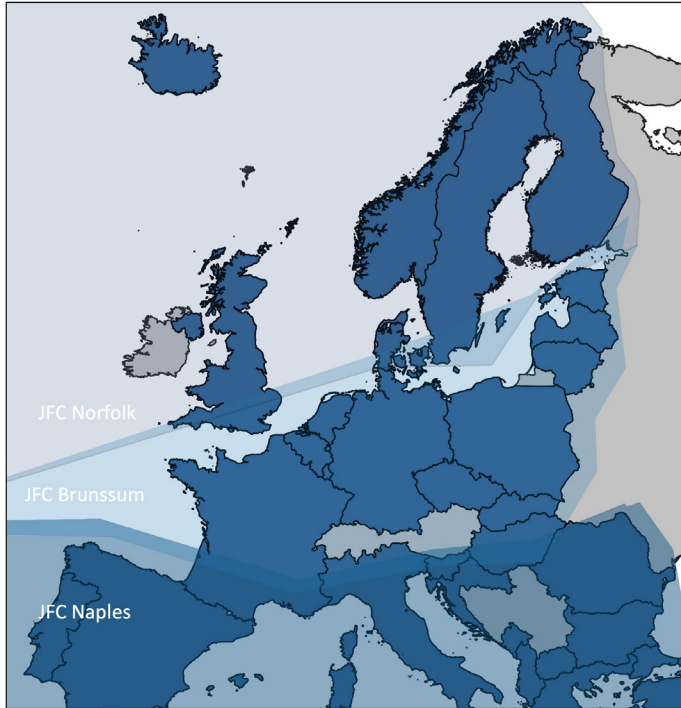
FIGURE 6: APPROXIMATE CURRENT JFC AREAS OF OPERATION

Image created by CSBA using QGIS and naturalearthdata.com, inspired by a graphic from Monaghan et al, “Is NATO Ready for War?”⁷⁰ Depicted JFC AORs are approximate based off of publicly available information and are intended for illustrative purposes only. For more details about NATO’s military command structure, see: https://shape.nato.int/military_command_structure.

On the other hand, arguments for the new members’ placement under JFC Norfolk focused heavily on the importance of not splitting Sweden and Finland from the other Nordic states, given their existing military ties and common security interests in the European Arctic, a region which had historically fallen within the AOR of NATO’s transatlantic command.⁷¹ Analysts and, at times, Nordic policymakers argued that it made little sense to split the Nordic states, particularly because they have a shared identity and already had extensive pre-existing cooperation efforts.⁷² Finnish strategic identity, for example, has traditionally emphasized its “Nordic-ness” over its connection to the Baltic states—even though Tallinn lies just 80 kilometers from Helsinki across the Gulf of Finland and Estonia and

70 Sean Monaghan et al, “Is NATO Ready for War?”, p.9 (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-06/240611_Monaghan_Ready_War_o.pdf?VersionId=UO.QCdGxKL2h_hy1PiZN8qalWtWAJ_YD.

71 The Nordic states consist of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

72 Av Eric Adamson and Minna Ålander, “Finland and Sweden Are Ready. Is NATO?,” *Kungliga Krigsvetenskapsakademien*, August 10, 2023, <https://kkrva.se/en/finland-and-sweden-are-ready-is-nato/>; Minna Ålander, “NATO’s New Northern Flank — Don’t Ruin It,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, July 20, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/natos-new-northern-flank-dont-ruin-it/>.

Finland share deep cultural and linguistic ties.⁷³ In 2024, then-Swedish Chief of Defense Micael Bydén said, “If you look at the map, it’s obvious to me that Nordic countries should go together. And when you look at the Baltics, they glue together with the continental Europe.”⁷⁴ As Arctic nations, Sweden and Finland both have important security and other interests in the High North. Moreover, many analysts argued, any potential allied reinforcements supporting Finland would likely arrive in the country via Norway and Sweden (ostensibly through JFC Norfolk’s AOR)—not Germany, Poland, and the Baltic states under JFC Brunssum.⁷⁵ One other argument for assignment to JFC Norfolk was that placement under a command based in the United States could help foster stronger transatlantic relationships for the new members.⁷⁶

Ultimately, in December 2025, Finland and Sweden (along with Denmark) were moved from a temporary placement in JFC Brunssum’s AOR to JFC Norfolk’s.⁷⁷ However, the discussion highlights a real challenge, namely that Sweden and Finland are integral to defense of *both* the North Atlantic and the High North *and* NATO’s eastern borders with Russia.

This report, as previewed in Chapter 1, contends that the best way for NATO to conceptualize deterrence and defense across the whole of northern Europe is through the lens of a “Northeast Quadrant,” comprising a single integrated area of operations that encompasses the Baltic Sea, the Baltic states, the Nordic states, and the High North. Regardless of where political and/or command lines are drawn, the region is so interconnected militarily that conceptualizing it as anything other than a single, coherent area of operations risks significant misallocation of resources and suboptimal deployment and employment of alliance military forces and capabilities. Moreover, all the countries in the Northeast Quadrant have shared threat perceptions, field modern defense capabilities tailored to that region, and have a long history of cooperation, which would facilitate their combined integrated operations in the event of armed conflict.

73 Iro Särkkä, “Nordic, European, or Atlanticist? Finland’s State Identity During the Post-Cold War Period,” *Nordic Review of International Studies*, no. 2, 2023, <https://nris.journal.fi/article/view/138270/90214>; Robin Häggblom, “The Baltic Connection,” *Corporal Frisk*, October 1, 2023, <https://corporalfrisk.com/2023/10/01/the-baltic-connection/>; Matti Pesu, “Finland in NATO: An Emerging Nordic-Atlantic Orientation?,” *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 22 (2024). Koivula and Ossa describe Finland’s dual identity as being in the High North and in the Baltic Sea region. Tommi Koivula and Heljä Ossa, “Nordic, Baltic, or Part of the High North? Considerations of Finland’s Geostrategic Position as a NATO Member State,” in *Finland in NATO: Perspectives on Strategy*, ed. Tommi Koivula and Matti Puranen (Routledge, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003644569>.

74 Detsch, “NATO’s New Map.”

75 Pesu, “Finland in NATO: An Emerging Nordic-Atlantic Orientation?,” 36.

76 Ibid, 37.

77 “NATO’s Allied Command Operations to Update Provisional, Regional Boundaries,” NATO Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, December 4, 2025, <https://shape.nato.int/news-releases/natos-allied-command-operations-to-update-provisional--regional-boundaries-.aspx>.

The Imperative to Treat the Northeast Quadrant as a Single Area of Operations

From a military perspective, there is no clean way of dividing the Northeast Quadrant region operationally. The Quadrant's subregions—the Baltic states, the Nordic states, the Baltic Sea, the “Cap of the North”⁷⁸ (the area where Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish territories meet above the Arctic Circle), Arctic waters, the Northern Atlantic Ocean, and the North Sea—are all interconnected.⁷⁹ A NATO operation to defend Estonia, for example, would likely include ground combat operations launched from or within Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia; reinforcement flows through those states; air operations launched from locations throughout the Baltic Sea region; efforts to deny Russia freedom of maneuver in the Baltic Sea and the Danish Straits; and reinforcement and resupply flows from the United States and elsewhere in Europe through Norway and/or Sweden and across the Baltic Sea. Russia could at the same time attempt to play on these intra-regional interrelationships to divide alliance attention and resources by, for example, launching a main attack into a Baltic state while concurrently conducting operations to seize Svalbard or Gotland or occupying parts of the Cap of the North.

The interconnections within the region are certainly not new, but the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO has filled in the previous geographic hole (the “missing pieces” in the regional “puzzle”) and reinforced the inherent interconnections between the different Northeast Quadrant subregions. A 1950 NATO military committee report—written long prior to Swedish and Finnish membership—argued, “[T]he defense of the [Northern European] region must ... be considered as a whole with the object of achieving one integrated and coordinated plan.”⁸⁰ More recently, a 2024 Finnish government report stated, “The military defense of Finland extends beyond the Finnish borders to a larger whole that stretches from the Baltic Sea region to the Nordic Allies in the Arctic and to the Arctic Ocean and the North Atlantic.”⁸¹ As Alexander Stubb—now Finland's president—has said, Finland's “feet are in the Baltic and ... [its] head is in the Arctic.”⁸² The Swedish Armed Forces appear to view the Nordic and Baltic Sea region as belonging to “the same operational area and

78 *Nordkalotten* in Norwegian and Swedish and *Pohjoiskalotti* in Finnish.

79 See, for example: Karsten Friis, “Analyzing Security Subregions: Forces of Push, Pull, and Resistance in Nordic Defense Cooperation,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (2021): ogabo09, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogabo09>; Joel Linnainmäki et al., NATO's New Northern Direction: The Evolving Role of the Alliance in Europe's North, *Finnish Foreign Policy Paper 11* (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2024), 5; Matti Pesu, *NATO in the North: The Emerging Division of Labour in Northern European Security*, FIIA Briefing Paper no. 370 (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2023), <https://fiia.fi/en/publication/nato-in-the-north>.

80 NATO Military Committee, “North Atlantic Defense Committee Decision on D.C. 13: A Report by the Military Committee on North Atlantic Treaty Organization Medium Term Plan,” April 1, 1950, p. 49.

81 Ministry of Defence (Finland), *Government Defence Report*, 9.

82 Kokoomus (National Coalition Party of Finland), “Alexander Stubbin puhe ylimääräisessä puoluekokouksessa [Alexander Stubb's speech at the extraordinary party conference],” October 28, 2023, <https://www.kokoomus.fi/alexander-stubbin-puhe-ylimaaraaisessa-puoluekokouksessa/>.

command structure,” requiring “both common and coordinated defense concepts.”⁸³ General Michael Claesson, then-Swedish Chief of Defense, and his co-author Zebulon Carlander describe the connections between the Arctic, North Atlantic, and the Baltic Sea region as necessitating “one coherent strategic entity.”⁸⁴

Despite the military interconnectedness of the region and the increased collaboration between Northeast Quadrant members, a coherent, widely-accepted and widely-used concept for the region has yet to emerge within NATO public discourse. NATO’s current command structure reflects a border between the Brunssum and Norfolk AORs that directly splits the region, thereby creating a C2 seam that arguably is inefficient in peacetime and potentially dangerous in wartime. Analysts have discussed various possible alternative organizing concepts such as “Northern Europe,” the “Baltic Sea Region,” a “Baltic triangle,” or NATO’s “northern flank” or “northeastern flank.”⁸⁵ However, these are often vague or leave out important regional actors. For example, does the “Baltic Sea Region” include Norway, which—although not a Baltic littoral state—is clearly relevant to defense of that area?

This division and the debates over which countries should be included in the respective AORs have practical military implications. Even though the SACEUR has ultimate authority over the entire NATO area of operations, most operational planning takes place at lower echelons. Indeed, each JFC is responsible for the planning and execution of plans in its respective geographically-oriented region, i.e., north, central, and south.⁸⁶ There is overlap between these areas of operations, of course, which could theoretically be resolved by direction from SACEUR or the SACEUR staff. However, both could easily become overstretched if charged with concurrent planning and execution at both strategic *and* operational levels.⁸⁷ Even if SACEUR were able to bridge any gaps during wartime, the day-to-day interactions

83 Micael Bydén, “Överbefälhavarens råd avseende svenskt Natomedlemskap [The Supreme Commander’s Advice Regarding Swedish NATO Membership],” Swedish Armed Forces, October 31, 2022, FM222-19979:13, p. 1.

84 Michael Claesson and Zebulon Carlander, “How Sweden and Finland Can Bolster NATO,” *War on the Rocks*, July 19, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/07/how-sweden-and-finland-can-bolster-nato/>.

85 For example, see: “Baltic Sea Region Security Initiative,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, accessed April 11, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/projects/baltic-sea-region-security-initiative>; Adamson and Ålander, “Finland and Sweden Are Ready. Is NATO?”; Hans Binnendijk and Conor Rodihan, *Geometries of Deterrence: Assessing Defense Arrangements in Europe’s Northeast* (Atlantic Council, May 2020), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Geometries-of-Deterrence-Report-Web.pdf>; Linnainmäki et al., *NATO’s New Northern Direction: The Evolving Role of the Alliance in Europe’s North*; Matti Pesu and Tuomas Iso-Markku, *Finland as a NATO Ally: First Insights into Finnish Alliance Policy*, Finnish Foreign Policy Paper no. 9 (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2022); Fritz Rademacher and Andrzej Lis, eds., *Deterrence and Defense in the Baltic Sea Region Against the Russian Threat* (Publishing Office of Doctrine and Training Centre of the Polish Armed Forces, 2026), 5.

86 NATO, “Allied Command Operations (ACO),” updated July 14, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/organization/nato-structure/allied-command-operations-aco>.

87 Palmer and Simón point to the problem of SACEUR’s capacity. Diego Ruiz Palmer and Luis Simón, *Rebalancing NATO’s Command*, CSDS In-Depth Paper no. 22 (Brussels School of Governance, Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy, 2026), 9.

that the members within an individual JFC staff have will translate into the relationships, assumptions, and patterns that will be heavily depended upon in wartime.

Coordination alone across area of operations seams is likely insufficient to make up for what in reality are critical military dependencies and demanding operational timelines across the Northeast Quadrant. For example, units in Sweden could be charged with conducting long-range strikes in support of operations to defend the Baltic states. Would those units report to JFC Norfolk, since they are geographically located in Sweden, or be under the operational control of JFC Brunssum, since that is where their combat effects would occur? How would coordination on operational issues like timing of strikes, targeting information, and clearance and defense of airspace be handled?

Functional commands help increase connectivity, but do not solve the fundamental problem exhibited by the JFC discussion. For example, although the Nordic states have already developed plans for air, ground, and logistics commands in Norway, Finland, and Sweden (respectively), there is not yet a maritime command, and the Baltic Sea waters are currently divided between JFC Norfolk and JFC Brunssum.⁸⁸ Commander Task Force (CTF) Baltic, a tactical maritime headquarters under NATO's Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM), was stood up in Rostock, Germany in 2024.⁸⁹ It is meant to be a rotating command and is scheduled to move to Gdynia, Poland in 2028 and to Sweden in 2032.⁹⁰ CTF Baltic will likely help mitigate some challenges and increase cooperation, but it is unclear if it could be a permanent solution for the maritime domain.

Since the JFCs hold operational control (OPCON) of assigned forces during wartime, any units moving from, e.g., Norway to Latvia would need to receive a "change of operational control" (CHOP) as they move across the geographic areas of operations lines between JFC Norfolk and JFC Brunssum.⁹¹ With those boundaries splitting the Northeast Quadrant,

88 Sveriges Radio, "NATO's New Nordic Command Structure Aims to Deter Russia," October 8, 2025, <https://www.sverigesradio.se/artikel/natos-new-nordic-command-structure-aims-to-deter-russia>; Piotr Szymański and Jacek Tarociński, "NATO's Northern Flank: Allied Forces and Structures in the Nordic Countries," *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, October 7, 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-10-07/natos-northern-flank-allied-forces-and-structures-nordic-countries>, and Antti Pihlajamaa and Iro Särkkä, "Finland and Collective Defence: The Finnish Role in Northern Europe and Beyond," in *NATO's New Northern Direction: The Evolving Role of the Alliance in Europe's North*, by Joel Linnainmäki et al., Finnish Foreign Policy Paper 11 (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2024), 39.

89 NATO, "Commander Task Force Baltic Established," October 22, 2024, <https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2024/Commander-Task-Force-Baltic-Established>; Szymański and Tarociński, "NATO's Northern Flank."

90 Szymański and Tarociński, "NATO's Northern Flank."

91 NATO joint doctrine defines "operational command" (OPCOM) as enabling the commander to use forces throughout the assigned area of operations, while under "operational control" (OPCON), the forces can only be used in ways approved by approved North Atlantic Council (NAC) plans. NATO and the Ministry of Defence (UK), *Allied Joint Doctrine for the Conduct of Operations* (Brussels: NATO Standardization Office, 2025), 31. This is related to a NATO transfer of authority (TOA), although TOAs can refer to a broader category of transfers of command, not necessarily ones occurring as forces move through different geographies. On NATO command operations, see: NATO, "Allied Command Operations (ACO)," NATO, updated July 14, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/organization/nato-structure/allied-command-operations-aco>.

NATO and SACEUR will need to ensure that the CHOP process functions smoothly, rapidly, and reliably under any operational circumstance.

These coordination and command issues are becoming more salient given that Russia now thinks of the region as a single area of operations. As described in Chapter 1, recent changes to Russian military districts and administrative organization suggests that the Russian Armed Forces view their “northwestern quadrant”—everything from the Baltic states to the Kola Peninsula—as one strategic direction that needs “dedicated command and control, planning forces, mobilization, territorial defense, and civil-military cooperation capabilities.”⁹² Such unified Russian planning covering the entire geographic area comprising NATO’s Northeast Quadrant would allow Russia to conduct its combat operations more seamlessly throughout the region, thereby posing coordination, attention, and resource challenges to NATO, particularly because such operations could, under NATO’s current organizational structure, occur within the areas of operations of multiple JFCs and require recurrent operational-level decisions from SACEUR staff, which as noted earlier may already be overstretched during a major conflict.⁹³

Quadrant Characteristics

Not only does conceptualizing the Northeast Quadrant as a single unified area of operations make military sense, but the region is also already uniquely positioned to be able to take advantage of such a concept. As noted earlier, the nations in the Northeast Quadrant share threat priorities, have a history of defense cooperation, and possess military capabilities that are tailored to their region. That does not mean that no change is necessary. Indeed, conceptualizing the Northeast Quadrant as one unified area of operations is just a necessary first step in enhancing deterrence and defense within it. However, these characteristics will help the NATO alliance as a whole, the Northeast Quadrant member states, and non-European NATO members who play a security role in the region capitalize on the operational planning and practical security benefits that can accrue from treating the region as a single coherent area of operations.

Common Threat Perceptions

Northern and northeastern European countries feel the threat from Russia more acutely than most countries in other regions within NATO. After all, every NATO member that shares a land border with Russia is in the notional Northeast Quadrant.⁹⁴ Within NATO, the Baltic states and Poland in particular have warned about Russian aggression for

92 Kukkola, *The Leningrad Military District*, 56.

93 Palmer and Simón, *Rebalancing NATO’s Command*.

94 Cattler, *Signals from the North*. The following NATO countries share a land border with Russia (listed from north to south): Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.

many years.⁹⁵ Finland, although careful in how it publicly described its eastern neighbor, has always retained a clear-eyed focus on the need to deter and defend against Russia.⁹⁶ Although it reduced its defense capacity substantially during the post-Cold War so-called peace dividend period, Sweden was already beginning to focus efforts on addressing a growing Russian challenge by late in the first decade of the 2000s.⁹⁷

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 sharpened these foci and (re)awakened the attention of other states. Norway, for example, had traditionally managed its relationship with Russia through the lens of balancing deterrence with reassurance.⁹⁸ Since 2022, however, it has been much more direct in its approach to Russia, including substantial increases in its defense efforts.⁹⁹ Former German chancellor Olaf Scholz famously declared a "*Zeitenwende*," signaling that Germany was taking the Russian threat very seriously and would begin major investment to reinvigorate its military capabilities (although the staying power of this shift was heavily debated until quite recently, as discussed below).¹⁰⁰ In 2024, Danish political parties agreed to a ten-year framework to strengthen Danish defense.¹⁰¹

95 Robyn Dixon, "Baltic Nations Long Warned About Russia. Now, Maybe the West is Listening," *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/12/baltics-poland-russia-warnings-nato/>.

96 General Janne Jaakola, Commander of the Finnish Defense Forces, has stated, "Even during the most peaceful times in the security environment, the possibility of a military conflict has not been ruled out. Finland maintains and develops a strong national defense capability..." in "Finnish Defense Chief: Finland is Dedicated to NATO's Northern, Baltic Needs," *Breaking Defense*, July 3, 2024, <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/07/finnish-defense-chief-finland-is-dedicated-to-natos-northern-baltic-needs/>.

97 Nima Khorrami, "Sweden's Strategic Shift: Navigating NATO Membership and the Path Forward," *The Arctic Institute*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/swedens-strategic-shift-navigating-nato-membership-path-forward/>; Douglas Brommesson, Ann-Marie Ekengren, and Anna Michalski, "Sweden's Policy of Neutrality: Success Through Flexibility?" in *Successful Public Policy in the Nordic Countries: Cases, Lessons, Challenges*, ed. Caroline de la Porte et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

98 Joachim Bentzen, "Norway's Strategic Role and Interests at NATO's Northern Flank," in *Defending NATO's Northern Flank: Power Projection and Military Operations*, VitalBook file, ed. Lon Strauss and Njord Wegge, *Contemporary Security Studies* (Routledge, 2024); Stian Bones, "A Defense Dilemma and a Possible Security Dilemma," in *Defending NATO's Northern Flank: Power Projection and Military Operations*, VitalBook file, ed. Lon Strauss and Njord Wegge, *Contemporary Security Studies* (Routledge, 2024); James Cameron and Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Norway, Deterrence, Reassurance and Strategic Stability in Europe," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 47, no. 3 (2024): 325–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2024.2321138>.

99 Government of Norway, "Norway to Increase Short Term Defence Spending in 2022," March 21, 2022, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/whats-new/regjeringen-med-strakstiltak-for-a-styrke-forsvaret/id2904668/>; Christina Mackenzie, "Seven European Nations Have Increased Defense Budgets in One Month. Who Will Be Next?" *Breaking Defense*, March 22, 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/03/seven-european-nations-have-increased-defense-budgets-in-one-month-who-will-be-next/>; Government of Norway, *National Security Strategy* (Oslo: Government of Norway, 2025), https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/3750a67cb19f4aac881401c5461773d8/en-gb/pdfs/national_security_strategy.pdf.

100 The Federal Government (Germany), "Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin," <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/service/archive/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

101 Danish Ministry of Defence, "Resolve and Capability to Take Responsibility," accessed April 11, 2026, <https://www.fmn.dk/en/topics/agreements-and-economy/2024-2033-danish-defence-agreement/#:~:text=Resolve%20and%20capability%20to%20take,GDP%20on%20defence%20and%20security>.

This focus sets the Northeast Quadrant members apart from most other NATO members. Although the alliance as a whole has emphasized Russia recently, there are still differences in threat perception among member states.¹⁰² Across numerous polls, Northeast Quadrant publics see Russia as a greater threat than publics in other European states.¹⁰³ In many ways, this is natural given that geography tends to dictate the threats that countries perceive as the most immediate.

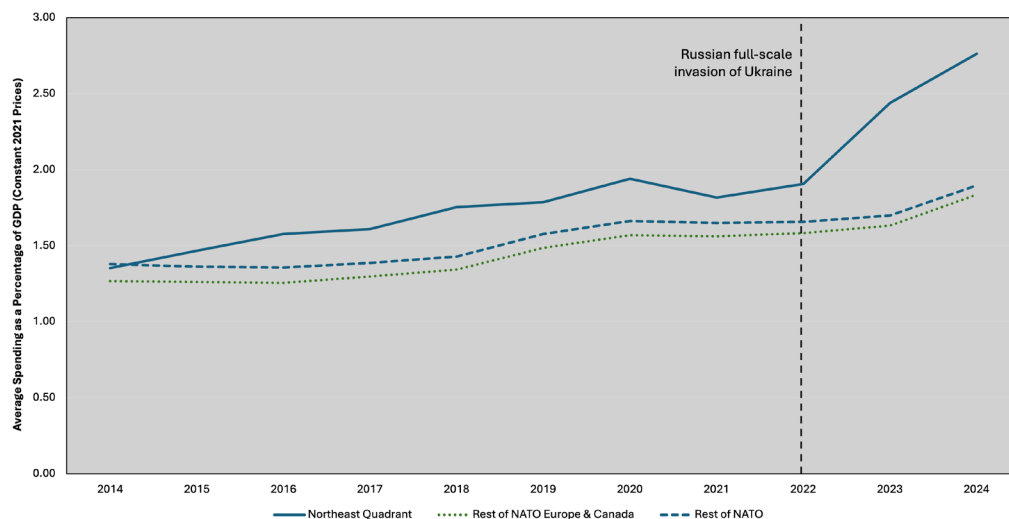
That is not to say that the members of the Northeast Quadrant states do not identify other threats or would not support NATO members in facing other concerns. However, the primary national threat to each country is Russia, and they are united in developing the necessary capabilities and capacities to counter that threat. This shared threat perception is highly likely to endure given the geographic proximity of these countries to Russia and a long history with the country.

One possible partial exception is Germany, with the results of the *Zeitenwende* not yet fully manifested.¹⁰⁴ In the past, Berlin long sought to maintain, where possible, more productive relations with Russia as part of efforts to keep tensions low while receiving economic benefits.¹⁰⁵ Regarding the Baltic Sea region, Germany previously exhibited what one analyst called a “benign neglect” towards a region that it had considered as stable.¹⁰⁶ Germany also has to balance any engagement with northern Europe with its interests in central Europe

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- 102 Gabriele Natalizia, Matteo Mazziotti di Celso, “NATO Is Thinking About Defense Spending Wrong,” *Foreign Policy*, February 4, 2026, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/02/04/nato-defense-spending-italy-gdp/>; Jacobo Ramos Folch, “Why Spain is Not Meeting NATO Spending Targets,” (Atlantic Council, December 1, 2025), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/why-spain-is-not-meeting-nato-spending-targets/>.
- 103 Csongor Körömi and Hanne Cokelaere, “The Closer to Russia the Greater the Fear, Opinion Poll Finds,” *Politico*, October 20, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-opinion-poll-closer-border-fear-yougov-eu-countries/>; Janell Fetterolf, Laura Clancy, and Jordan Lippert, “Who Do People Think is Their Country’s Greatest Threat?” *Pew Research Center*, July 8, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/07/08/who-do-people-think-is-their-countrys-greatest-threat/>; Jean-Yves Dormagen, “Ce que les Européens veulent vraiment: le dernier sondage Eurobazooka [What Europeans Really Want: The Latest Eurobazooka Poll],” *Le Grand Continent*, December 4, 2025, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/12/04/ce-que-les-europeens-veulent-vraiment-le-dernier-eurobazooka/>; Célia Belin and Pawel Zerka, “The European Archipelago: Building Bridges in a Post-Western Europe,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, February 11, 2026, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-european-archipelago-building-bridges-in-a-post-western-europe/>.
- 104 Göran Swistek and Michael Paul, *Geopolitics in the Baltic Sea Region. The “Zeitenwende” in the Context of Critical Maritime Infrastructure, Escalation Threats and the German Willingness to Lead*, SWP Comment no. 9 (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2023).
- 105 András Rác, *Germany’s Shifting Policy Towards Russia: The Sudden End of Ostpolitik*, FIIA Briefing Paper no. 335 (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2022), https://fii.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/bp335_germanys-shifting-policy-towards-russia_the-sudden-end-of-ostpolitik_andras-rac.pdf; Friedrich Conradi, “From Accommodation to Deterrence: Can Germany Lead on Russia and Ukraine?” *Carnegie Politika Commentary*, July 18, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/07/germany-ukraine-conflict-role?lang=en>.
- 106 Minna Ålander, “Out In the Cold? Germany’s Emerging Role in Northern European Security,” *Kungl Krigsvetenskapsakademiens Handlingar Och Tidskrift 2025*, no. 2 (2025), <https://en.kkrva.se/artiklar/out-in-the-cold-germanys-emerging-role-in-northern-european-security/>.

and elsewhere.¹⁰⁷ As a result, some northern European countries have had a sense of ambivalence towards Germany as a reliable defense partner.^{108 109}

FIGURE 7: DEFENSE SPENDING IN THE NORTHEAST QUADRANT



2024 figures are an estimate provided by NATO. The 2025 data was missing Germany, so that year was not included. Swedish and Finnish data are included from the year that they joined NATO. Data available from: NATO, "Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)," August 28, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2025/08/28/defence-expenditure-of-nato-countries-2014-2025>.

This shared threat perception has contributed to increased defense spending in the Northeast Quadrant. Compared with the rest of NATO, the Northeast Quadrant countries have consistently outspent other parts of the alliance since 2014 (see Figure 7). In 2025, for example, Poland and Lithuania spent an estimated 4 percent of GDP in defense.¹¹⁰ Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, and Norway all spent above 3 percent.¹¹¹ Of the alliance's top 10 spenders in terms of percentage of GDP on defense in 2025, eight were in the Northeast Quadrant.¹¹² In other words, the Northeast Quadrant members are strongly committed to their defense.

107 Robin Allers, "Wanted—German Military Engagement on the Northern Flank," *Kungl Krigsvetenskapsakademiens Handlingar Och Tidskrift* 2025, no. 2 (2025).

108 Allers, "Wanted—German Military Engagement on the Northern Flank"; Ålander, "Out In the Cold? Germany's Emerging Role in Northern European Security."

109 However, in March 2025, Germany initiated large increases in defense spending, enabled by legislative votes to exempt spending on defense and security from its strict debt rules. See, for example: Frank Gardner and Toby Luckhurst, "Germany votes for historic boost to defence spending," *BBC*, March 25, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62z6gljv2yo>; and Steven Erlanger, "Germany Is Pumping Up Its Military Spending. That Worries Its Neighbors," *New York Times*, March 3, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/03/world/europe/germany-military-defense-spending-europe-nato.html>.

110 NATO, "Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)," August 28, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2025/08/28/defence-expenditure-of-nato-countries-2014-2025>.

111 NATO, "Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)."

112 The United States and Greece make up the other two. NATO, "Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)."

A History of Security Cooperation

Members of the Northeast Quadrant already have a rich history of security cooperation, which has enabled policy coordination as well as joint acquisition, training, and exercises in the region.¹¹³ First, each country has bilateral relationships with the others. Sweden and Finland, for example, have particularly deep defense cooperation, to include undertaking joint operational planning across all branches of their militaries.¹¹⁴ In 2022, Finland and Estonia announced the integration of their coastal missile defense systems, in effect enabling them to close the Gulf of Finland off to hostile shipping in time of crisis or conflict.¹¹⁵ In March 2025, Denmark and Finland signed a defense pact that increases cooperation in the region, and that same year, Finnish defense company Nammo agreed to revive an ammunition plant in Denmark by 2027.¹¹⁶

Larger multinational groupings have also shaped the region. For example, the Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish air forces have been training together for over a decade, with near weekly trilateral joint exercises in Lapland in the north of the countries.¹¹⁷ Northeast Quadrant countries have also interacted as groups with outside actors, including the United States; Finland, Sweden, and the United States, for example, have previously interacted in a trilateral format.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have sharply increased

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- 113 See, for example: Ann-Sofie Dahl, “Back to the Future: NORDEF’s First Decade and Prospects for the Next,” *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 4, no. 1, 2021, <https://sjms.nu/articles/10.31374/sjms.85>; Tuomas Forsberg, “The Rise of Nordic Defence Cooperation: A Return to Regionalism?,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 5 (2013): 1161–81, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12065>; Karsten Friis, “Reviving Nordic Security and Defense Cooperation,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 2, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/nordic-baltic-defense-cooperation-nato?lang=en>; Håkon Lunde Saxi, “Nordic Defence Cooperation,” in *Handbook of Nordic Cooperation*, ed. Nina Graeger et al. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap-oa/book/9781035319725/chapter24.xml>.
- 114 Michael Jonsson and Robin Häggblom, “Cooperation Can Make the NATO Lake a Reality,” *War on the Rocks*, August 29, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/08/cooperation-can-make-the-nato-lake-a-reality/>; Hanna Ojanen and Arto Väisänen, “Finnish and Swedish NATO Membership: What Does It Hold for the Arctic?,” in *Defending NATO’s Northern Flank: Power Projection and Military Operations*, VitalBook file, ed. Lon Strauss and Njord Wegge, *Contemporary Security Studies* (Routledge, 2024); Antti Pihlajamaa and Oscar Lassenius, “Sweden, Norway, and the United Kingdom as Finland’s Allies,” in *Finland in NATO: Perspectives on Strategy*, ed. Tommi Koivula et al. (Routledge, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003644569>; Piotr Szymański, *The Northern Tandem. The Swedish-Finnish Defence Cooperation* (OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, 2019), <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2019-03-20/northern-tandem-swedish-finnish-defence-cooperation>.
- 115 “Minister: Estonia, Finland to Integrate Coastal Missile Defense Systems,” *ERR*, August 12, 2022, <https://news.err.ee/1608683440/minister-estonia-finland-to-integrate-coastal-missile-defense-systems>; Jonsson and Häggblom, “Cooperation Can Make the NATO Lake a Reality.”
- 116 Ålander and Alberque, “NATO’s Nordic Enlargement”; Jonsson and Häggblom, “Cooperation Can Make the NATO Lake a Reality”; Ministry of Defence (Finland), “Joint Declaration on Enhanced Defence Cooperation between Denmark and Finland on 4 March 2025,” <https://defmin.fi/en/-/joint-declaration-on-enhanced-defence-cooperation-between-denmark-and-finland-on-4-march-2025#bc4e5276>; Rudy Ruitenberg, “Denmark Picks Nammo to Restart Ammo Production at Shuttered Plant,” *DefenseNews*, March 3, 2025, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/03/03/denmark-picks-nammo-to-restart-ammo-production-at-shuttered-plant/>.
- 117 Jonsson and Häggblom, “Cooperation Can Make the NATO Lake a Reality.”
- 118 Joakim Erma Møller, “Trilateral Defence Cooperation in the North: An Assessment of Interoperability between Norway, Sweden and Finland,” *Defence Studies* 19, no. 3 (2019): 235–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2019.1634473>.

their mutual defense cooperation. General Martin Herem, former Chief of the Estonian Defence Forces, early in his tenure (2018-2024) pushed hard for closer Baltic defense cooperation, advocating for unified defense planning on a Baltic regional rather than a national basis.¹¹⁹ The Baltic states' defense cooperation now extends to matters such as joint procurement and regional defense strategies such as the joint Baltic Defence Line initiative.

Defense cooperation has also been coordinated through a set of regional organizations with disparate membership and varying purposes (see Figure 8).¹²⁰ The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) partnership was founded in 2009 among the five Nordic states (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) to consolidate defense cooperation initiatives among the group members.¹²¹ The Nordic-Baltic Eight—comprised of Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden—was formally established in 2000 and consults on a wide range of military and non-military issues.¹²² The Northern Group was founded in 2010 as a defense partnership between the Nordics and the United Kingdom and subsequently expanded to include the Baltics, Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland. While the group is largely a consultative body, it has also conducted defense coordination.¹²³ The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) seeks to provide consultations and rapid-reaction force capabilities, with a special focus on Northern Europe.¹²⁴ The Northern Group and the JEF are both British-led initiatives, highlighting London's role in support to the Baltic Sea region.

119 Maj. Gen. Martin Herem, "Estonian Chief of Defence Forces: Regional Cooperation as the Main Enabler," Outlook, *Defense News*, December 2, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/outlook/2019/12/02/estonian-chief-of-defence-forces-regional-cooperation-as-the-main-enabler/>.

120 See also: Binnendijk and Rodihan, Geometries of Deterrence; Maren Garberg Bredesen, *The Shifting Boundaries of Nordic Defence Cooperation*, Research Paper no. 1 (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25747>; Henrik Breitenbauch et al., *Options for Enhancing Nordic-Baltic Defence and Security Cooperation: An Explorative Survey* (Centre for Military Studies, University of Copenhagen, May 2017), https://cms.polsci.ku.dk/publikationer/options-for-enhancing-nordicbaltic-defence/CMS_Rapport_2017_Options_for_enhancing_Nordic-Baltic_Defence_and_Security_Cooperation.pdf.

121 "About NORDEF," *NORDEF* (Nordic Defense Cooperation), accessed April 12, 2026, <https://www.nordefco.org/the-basics-about-nordefco>.

122 Anna Wieslander and Louise Blomqvist, "How the Nordic-Baltic States Became Europe's Reliable Security Engine," (Atlantic Council, January 27, 2026), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/how-the-nordic-baltic-states-became-europes-reliable-security-engine/>.

123 Alexandra Brzozowski and Alicia Prager, "Northern Group Aims to Step up Regional Security Cooperation," Defence and Security, *Euractiv*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/northern-group-aims-to-step-up-regional-security-cooperation/>.

124 Sean Monaghan and Ed Arnold, *Indispensable: NATO's Framework Nations Concept beyond Madrid* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 27, 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/indispensable-natos-framework-nations-concept-beyond-madrid>.

FIGURE 8: REGIONAL DEFENSE ORGANIZATIONS IN THE NORTHEAST QUADRANT

Group	Primary Issues	Membership								
										
NORDEFCO	Defense cooperation	✓		✓				✓		✓
Nordic-Baltic Eight	Political, economic, and defense cooperation	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Northern Group	Consultation on security, NATO-EU cooperation, and other topics	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Joint Expeditionary Force	Defense, esp. rapid response	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
2022 NATO	Collective defense	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
NATO today	Collective defense	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Graphic created by CSBA.

Despite the array of defense cooperation organizations, until Sweden and Finland joined NATO, none both covered the entire region and created a platform for shared defense planning. In 2025, Jens Stoltenberg, the former NATO secretary-general, said, “The Nordic countries have a unified security policy for the first time since the Kalmar Union in the 1400s. They have recognized the importance of deepening their military cooperation in a way that we haven’t seen for several centuries.”¹²⁵

Indeed, their membership in the alliance has strengthened cooperation across, within, and outside of these organizations.¹²⁶ For example, in 2023, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland announced their intention to create a Joint Nordic Air Command.¹²⁷ Although the concept of a Nordic air force had been discussed since the mid-1990s, the renewed focus on Russia, coupled with Sweden’s and Finland’s accession to NATO, enabled Nordic policymakers to make the concept a reality with the establishment in early 2025 of the Joint Nordic Air Division headquartered at the Norwegian Joint Air Operation Centre in Bodø to

125 Sune Engel Rasmussen, “Sweden Has the Tanks. Finland Has the Troops. Welcome to the Pan-Nordic Army,” *World, Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/europe-nordic-military-defense-a5d5da5b>.

126 For example, NORDEFCO can now likely take on more sensitive projects. Friis, “Reviving Nordic Security and Defense Cooperation.”

127 “Nordic Countries Plan Joint Air Defence to Counter Russian Threat,” *Reuters*, March 24, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nordic-countries-plan-joint-air-defence-counter-russian-threat-2023-03-24/>.

operationalize a Nordic Air Power Concept (NAPC).¹²⁸ In the maritime domain, within a few weeks of the December 2024 deliberate damaging of an undersea cable between Estonia and Finland, all of the NATO littoral Baltic states met in a mini-Baltic Sea summit to coordinate responses.¹²⁹

The deep security relationships Sweden and Finland already had with the other regional states also appears to have helped ease their transition into NATO. By 2025, only two years after Finland and one year after Sweden joined the alliance, in addition to the new Joint Air Operations Centre in Bodø, a ground command in Mikkeli, Finland and a logistics command in Enköping, Sweden were also established.¹³⁰ As the region moves forward under a unified concept, this history and the familiarity and relationships it brings should enable the countries to work ever more closely together to increase the strength of deterrence in the region.

Tailored Defense Capabilities

Conceptualizing the Northeast Quadrant as a unified area of operations and relying most heavily on the Quadrant states to focus on initial defense of the region, as opposed to an emphasis on out-of-area taskings, also takes advantage of and enables the furtherance of national defense capabilities that are tailored to the region.

The Northeast Quadrant has unique geographic features. For example, the Baltic Sea features several chokepoints (e.g., the Danish Straits and the Gulf of Finland) and several islands and archipelagos. It is a shallow sea overall—but it does have deeper areas. It is also considered brackish water, but the salinity levels do vary. Finally, parts of the sea feature seasonal ice cover, and the weather can fluctuate greatly across seasons. These factors combined make the Baltic Sea a unique operating environment.¹³¹ National navies operating in the area have developed specific capabilities for operations at sea. For instance, Sweden operates corvettes, amphibious units, coastal defenses, and submarines that are built specially for the Baltic Sea.¹³² For its national defense, Finland developed a strong coastal defense system, with corvettes armed with anti-air and anti-ship missiles, coastal missile defense, minelaying and mine countermeasures, and an amphibious capability

128 “Four Nordic Air Forces Fighting as One,” March 3, 2025, <https://www.forsvaret.no/en/news/articles/nordic-division>. The Nordic Air Power Concept (NAPC) is a joint operational doctrine intended to integrate the four Nordic air forces as a single, coordinated force for a unified, seamless northern defense zone aligned with NATO structures.

129 Särkkä, “Nodal Defense and the Power of the Minilaterals in the Baltic Sea Region,” 40. See also: NATO, “NATO Launches ‘Baltic Sentry’ to Increased Critical Infrastructure Security,” January 14, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2025/01/14/nato-launches-baltic-sentry-to-increase-critical-infrastructure-security>.

130 Sveriges Radio, “NATO’s New Nordic Command Structure Aims to Deter Russia”; Szymański and Tarociński, “NATO’s Northern Flank.”

131 See, for example: Savitz and Winston, *A Brief Naval Overview of the Baltic Sea Region*.

132 Savitz and Winston, *A Brief Naval Overview of the Baltic Sea Region*; Linus Höller, “The Shallow Baltic Sea Holds Deep Secrets About a Hybrid War on NATO,” *Defense News*, December 9, 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/special-reports/2024/12/09/the-shallow-baltic-sea-holds-deep-secrets-about-a-hybrid-war-on-nato/>.

through the Swedish-speaking Nyland brigade.¹³³ Its planned *Pohjanmaa*-class corvettes will have an ice-strengthened hull to operate in the Baltic year-round.¹³⁴ Poland is acquiring several Swedish A26 *Blekinge*-class submarines, three Type 140 VLS-equipped frigates armed for air defense and antiship missions, and *Delfin*-class signals intelligence (SIGINT) ships. The Baltic states have smaller navies but do feature coastal defenses and minelaying capabilities.¹³⁵

The Northeast Quadrant countries are all located near Russia, which necessitates some unique air assets and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP). For example, the Finnish Air Force, in the process of acquiring F-35As, has trained to fight in an A2/AD environment and possesses long-range strike weapons, including JASSM-ERs.¹³⁶ Finland has a dispersed air operations doctrine and is also building underground facilities to protect its air assets.¹³⁷ Sweden's air force similarly practices dispersed operations, with pilots trained to take off from short runways or roads.¹³⁸ Its air fleet is also designed to be able to maintain a high level of readiness and to be maintainable by conscripts after relatively short training periods.¹³⁹ Denmark, Germany, Poland, Finland, and Norway all have programs in place to

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- 133 Savitz and Winston, *A Brief Naval Overview of the Baltic Sea Region*, 7-8. The Finnish Navy, "Nyland Brigade Trains Versatile Coastal Ranger Troops with High Performance Capability," accessed April 12, 2026, <https://merivoimat.fi/en/nyland-brigade/about-us>.
- 134 The Finnish Defence Forces, "Pohjanmaa class," The Finnish Defence Forces, <https://puolustusvoimat.fi/en/equipment/-/cat/asset/view/id/326> (accessed April 17, 2026).
- 135 Savitz and Winston, *A Brief Naval Overview of the Baltic Sea Region*, 7-8.
- 136 Finnish Defence Forces Logistics Command, "Logistics Command to Procure Long-Range Air-to-Surface Missiles for F-35 Multi-Role Fighters," May 31, 2024, https://logistiikkalaitos.fi/sv/-/1948673/langdistansrobotar-for-f-35-multirollflygplan?languageId=en_US.
- 137 On dispersal, see: Juha-Pekka Keränen, "The Finnish Air Force: Ensuring Readiness and Leveraging High-End Air Capabilities while Integrating with NATO," *The Journal of the JAPCC* 37 (May 2024), <https://www.japcc.org/articles/the-finnish-air-force/>; Peter Rybski, "Dispersal: When All of Your Bases Are Within Enemy Missile Range," *Sixty Degrees North* (blog), March 20, 2024, https://sixtydegreesnorth.substack.com/p/dispersal-when-all-of-your-bases?utm_medium=email; Solli et al, "A Flexible and Resilience Nordic Air Base Concept." On the facilities, see: Karelian Air Force, "F-35-hävittäjien infran rakennustyöt Karjalan lennostossa etenevät aikataulussaan [Construction work on F-35 fighter infrastructure at Karelia Air Base is progressing on schedule]," Finnish Air Force, October 1, 2025, <https://ilmavoimat.fi/-/f-35-havittajien-infran-rakennustyot-karjalan-lennostossa-etenevat-aikataulussaan>; Juha Mäntykenttä, "Rovaniemen hävittäjätukikohdan rakentamisessa kuhinaa riittää myös maan alla [There is also a lot of buzz underground about the construction of the Rovaniemi fighter base]," *Yle News*, August 16, 2024, <https://yle.fi/a/74-20105189>; Annu Passoja, "Lapin lennosto saa ensimmäisenä uudet hävittäjät – kasvaako uhka Rovaniemeä kohtaan? [Lapland Air Force will be the first to receive new fighters - will the threat to Rovaniemi increase?]," *Yle News*, December 17, 2025, <http://yle.fi/a/74-20200159>.
- 138 Elisabeth Braw, "Old MacJohan Had a Fighter Jet," *Foreign Policy*, August 23, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/08/23/sweden-nato-gripen-rural-runway-fighter-jet/>; Tony Osborne, "Sweden Hones Air Force Dispersion Capabilities Amid Regional Threats," *Aviation Week*, May 28, 2024, <https://aviationweek.com/defense/budget-policy-operations/sweden-hones-air-force-dispersion-capabilities-amid-regional>.
- 139 Henningsen, "Consequences of NATO membership in the air domain," (Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), March 2025).

acquire F-35As, suggesting more than 200 of the fifth-generation stealth aircraft will soon be available in the region.¹⁴⁰

Their proximity to Russia has also encouraged border countries to develop large ground forces. The Finnish Army, for example, in 2024 had a wartime strength of 280,000, training approximately 22,000 conscripts annually.¹⁴¹ Finland furthermore has one of the largest artillery forces in Europe. The Baltic states, although small, offer robust ground capabilities, buttressed by the Forward Land Forces (FLF) units in each country. Estonia stands out with a similar relative mobilization capacity as Finland, with a mobilization registry of 230,000.¹⁴² Poland, meanwhile, is building one of the strongest armies in Europe.¹⁴³

Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark all possess capabilities designed to operate in the European Arctic.¹⁴⁴ Norway has long emphasized its High North capabilities, with the 2024 Norwegian Defense Pledge increasing spending for capabilities intended for employment in the region, with a particular emphasis on additional ground forces and greater multi-domain situational awareness.¹⁴⁵ Norway's Andøya air station is planned to be used as a base for NATO aircraft, including long-range surveillance drones, that will operate in the High North.¹⁴⁶ Norway also possesses tactical combat aircraft, maritime-patrol aircraft, ice-capable surface ships, and submarines that can operate in the region.¹⁴⁷ Sweden has a history of exercising High North capabilities, although it has not until recently invested heavily in military presence in the region.¹⁴⁸ It is currently building up two mechanized brigades

140 "F-35 in Action," *Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II*, accessed April 11, 2026, <https://www.f35.com/f35/global-enterprise.html>.

141 The total joint force has 280,000 personnel with a reserve force of 870,000. Ministry of Defence (Finland), *Government Defence Report*, 34–35. See also: The Finnish Army, "Army," The Finnish Army, <https://maavoimat.fi/en/about-us> (accessed April 17, 2026).

142 Estonian Defence Forces, <https://mil.ee/en/defence-forces/>.

143 Slawomir Sierakowski, "The Strongest Army in Europe?" *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik (DGAP)*, September 4, 2023, <https://dgap.org/de/forschung/publikationen/strongest-army-europe>; Loveday Morris, "Poland Is on a Quest to Have Europe's Strongest Military—with U.S. Arms," *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/22/poland-us-weapons-ukraine-russia/>.

144 See: Abbie Tingstad et al., *Report on the Arctic Capabilities of the U.S. Armed Forces* (RAND Corporation, November 1, 2023), 30–33, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1638-1.html.

145 The Government of Norway, "The Norwegian Defence Pledge," April 5, 2024, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/documents/the-norwegian-defence-pledge/id3032809/>.

146 Trine Jonassen and Birgitte Annie Hansen, "Norway reopens Andøya Air Station as base for long-range drones," *High North News*, modified April 12, 2024, <https://en.highnorthnews.com/politics/norway-reopens-andoya-air-station-as-base-for-long-range-drones/135981>; Atle Saalesen, "Norway establishes Arctic base for long-range drones," *The Barents Observer*, April 3, 2024, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/norway-establishes-arctic-base-for-longrange-drones/165666>.

147 Tingstad et al., *Report on the Arctic Capabilities of the U.S. Armed Forces*, 31.

148 Sweden recently released a new strategy for the Arctic. "Sveriges Strategi För Ett Fredligt, Säkert Och Hållbart Arktis [Sweden's Strategy for a Peaceful, Secure, and Sustainable Arctic]," Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 2026.

designed for operations in the subarctic, with plans for them to be operational by 2028.¹⁴⁹ Sweden, like its neighbors, regularly trains select ground units and fighter jets in the Cap of the North.¹⁵⁰ Finland similarly trains its Arctic forces regularly and is a global leader in icebreaker design and production.¹⁵¹ Denmark, which has an Arctic presence due to its sovereignty over Greenland, possesses ice-capable vessels, special forces units tailored to the Arctic, and robust domain awareness.¹⁵²

A Forward Land Forces Finland multinational NATO battlegroup designed to strengthen deterrence and defense in the Arctic and High North was activated in June 2026.¹⁵³ Sweden is the FLF Finland's framework nation, providing a core battalion based in Boden in northern Sweden, while the Multinational Staff Element is located in Rovaniemi, Finland (hosted by the Finnish Jaeger Brigade) under the command of SACEUR and NATO. The battlegroup provides forces specializing in warfare under Arctic conditions.

Deterrence and Defense in the Quadrant

Given the Quadrant's geography and that many of the Quadrant states are already thinking regionally, NATO should accordingly adopt regional-focused strategic and operational concepts for deterrence and defense in the region.

In the event of war with Russia, NATO has two principal military tasks with regard to the Northeast Quadrant. First, it must defend the territory of every member state bordering Russia (and Belarus, a close partner of Russia that has been used as a staging area for the war in Ukraine and for hybrid activities against Northeast Quadrant countries). Second, it must ensure the security of the High North, protecting member state territory from attack and minimizing the use of Arctic waters to disrupt trans-Atlantic and intra-European flows of forces, materiel, and supplies from North American NATO members to European NATO.

These two tasks must be executed concurrently because Russia will likely conduct simultaneous and supporting combat operations in both the upper and lower areas of the Quadrant. As importantly, NATO combat operations and logistics and sustainment efforts occurring in each are inherently interconnected given both geography and military operational factors. Moreover, significant campaign operations and combat outcomes in one Northeast Quadrant area will have direct impacts on operations in the other. Thus, the military operations in

149 Atle Staalesen, "Sweden Beefs Up Defence Forces in the North," *The Barents Observer*, October 29, 2024, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/sweden-beefs-up-defence-forces-in-the-north/419631>.

150 Tingstad et al., *Report on the Arctic Capabilities of the U.S. Armed Forces*, 30.

151 Ibid, 33–34.

152 Ibid, 33.

153 NATO, "Forward Land Forces Finland established to contribute to NATO's deterrence and defence posture," June 6, 2026, <https://shape.nato.int/news-releases/forward-land-forces-finland-established-to-contribute-to-natos-deterrence-and-defence-posture>.

each part of the Quadrant will essentially be symbiotically related, which provides the core rationale for the report's contention that the Northeast Quadrant should come to be seen as one single coherent area of operations under a unified JFC.

CHAPTER 3

Defending the Northeast Quadrant's Borders with Russia

The first task facing the Northeast Quadrant is to defend NATO's borders with Russia in the region. Finland's accession to NATO essentially doubled the length of the Russian border with NATO states, adding about 1,340 km to the previous roughly 1,250 km. Although this increases the amount of territory that the alliance must defend, the membership of Finland and Sweden actually creates new opportunities to defend NATO's border with Russia. In particular, their membership enables NATO to adopt a new defense strategy that balances forward defense with interdiction and strike, presenting a stronger deterrent and defense against Russian aggression along NATO's Northeast Quadrant border with Russia.

Changing Defense Environment of the Baltic States

The Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—remain the most geographically vulnerable NATO states to Russian armed attack. Their lack of geographic depth, combined with relatively small populations and military forces, raises concern about the possibility of Russia pursuing a *fait accompli* strategy.¹⁵⁴ There are two primary reasons why analysts have traditionally been so concerned about this possibility: Russia's local superiority and time-distance advantage in the Baltic states, and NATO's difficulty in resupplying and reinforcing the Baltic states. Both of these concerns can be ameliorated substantially

154 David Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (RAND Corporation, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1253>. The 2016 RAND game focused heavily on the initial stages of conflict. See also Michael Kofman, "Getting the Fait Accompli Problem Right in U.S. Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, November 3, 2020, <http://warontherocks.com/2020/11/getting-the-fait-accompl-problem-right-in-u-s-strategy/>. See also: Billy Fabian et al., *Strengthening the Defense of NATO's Eastern Frontier* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019); van Tol et al., *Deterrence and Defense in the Baltic Region: New Realities*.

given Swedish and Finnish accession to NATO – if the alliance takes full advantage of their membership.

First, Russia was seen as having both local numerical superiority over the Baltic states and the NATO forces stationed forward in the region and a time-distance advantage, meaning that it could likely affect change in the Baltic states more quickly than NATO could respond. Prior to 2022, numerous analyses concluded Russia would prevail in a limited armed conflict by exploiting its time-distance advantage to seize territory in the Baltic region before the NATO alliance could effectively generate a response, thereby presenting NATO with a choice between embarking on a difficult, uncertain, and potentially highly escalatory counteroffensive to liberate alliance territory or accepting defeat.¹⁵⁵

Russia's time-distance advantage—and corresponding NATO disadvantage—was further reinforced by its heavily armed and fortified Kaliningrad exclave. Presuming that the Russian A2/AD capabilities situated there were as effective and potent as advertised, A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad covered the Baltic littoral region and the Baltic Sea itself.¹⁵⁶ Kaliningrad could be seen metaphorically as a “cork” that could effectively bottle up or block the ground and maritime lines of communication between the Baltic states and the rest of NATO. Geographically, NATO forces and materiel coming to reinforce the defense of the Baltic states would only be able to reach them via highly contested LOCs by sea or air over the Baltic Sea or by land transits through the narrow Suwalki Gap along the Poland-Lithuanian border between Kaliningrad and Belarus.

Moreover, from a Russian perspective Kaliningrad was eminently defensible against NATO attacks given the quite narrow threat sector running from the southern Baltic Sea to the Suwalki Gap from which most NATO attacks could be expected to come; the complex terrain along much of the Kaliningrad-Polish border making NATO ground assaults difficult; and of course, the robust A2/AD capabilities situated there, including strong air and missile defenses. Russian naval and air maritime strike forces would be able to deny or impose significant losses within large parts of the Baltic Sea on NATO assets seeking to reinforce or resupply the Baltic states by sea. To coerce Sweden and Finland to retain

155 See, for example: Eric S. Edelman and Whitney McNamara, *U.S. Strategy for Maintaining a Europe Whole and Free* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017), <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/u.s.-strategy-for-maintaining-a-europe-whole-and-free/publication/1>; Scott Boston et al., *Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe: Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority* (RAND, 2018), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2402.html; Hodges, Ben et al., *Securing the Suwalki Corridor: Strategy, Statecraft, Deterrence, and Defense* (Center for European Policy Analysis, July 9, 2018), <https://cepa.org/article/securing-the-suwalki-corridor/>; Ulrich Kühn, *Preventing Escalation in the Baltics: A NATO Playbook* (Carnegie International Endowment for Peace, 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2018/03/preventing-escalation-in-the-baltics-a-nato-playbook>; and Gian Gentile et al., *Revisiting RAND's Russia Wargames After the Invasion of Ukraine: Summary and Implications* (RAND Corporation, November 21, 2023), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2031-1.html.

156 There were—and are—reasons to be skeptical about the potency of Russian A2/AD capabilities. See Robert Dalsjö et al., *Bursting the Bubble? Russian A2/AD in the Baltic Sea Region: Capabilities, Countermeasures, and Implications* (Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2019).

their non-alignment in the event of war (including denial of permission for NATO aircraft to overfly their airspace), Russia could threaten air and missile strikes from Kaliningrad and elsewhere against Sweden and Finland and could also implicitly threaten their seaborne commerce.

The accession of Sweden and Finland into NATO, however, has the potential to fundamentally alter these features, should the Northeast Quadrant members and NATO as a whole take proper advantage of the opportunities posed by their membership in the alliance. Prior to Sweden and Finland's membership in NATO, Russian leaders would likely have worked to compel these Nordic states to stay neutral but did not have to assume that they would be involved. Now, however, just as NATO can plan on Swedish and Finnish involvement in NATO plans, so too must Russia.

Importantly, at the military-operational level Finnish and Swedish accession could potentially provide for substantial mitigation of the Russian fait accompli threat to the three Baltic states. First, more forces can be available at the border more quickly. In 2025, for example, Sweden sent its first infantry battalion to Latvia as part of the NATO FLF force in that country, making it the third-largest troop contributor to the FLF that year after Canada and Spain.¹⁵⁷ Forces on the border is not just about ground presence, however. Strike assets from Sweden and Finland—as well as other NATO airborne strike, tanker, and transport platforms flying in Swedish and Finnish airspace and/or operating from sites in Sweden and Finland—can also provide additional firepower to the region.

Second, Russia would have to contend with more challenges. For example, Russian air and missile defenses (including and perhaps especially in Kaliningrad) would face a wider threat sector, with potential paths of any NATO strikes extending from the Poland-Belarus border to the Finland-Russia border. Russia would also face expanded NATO-affiliated forces and structures positioned in or operating from Sweden and Finland, compelling Russia to defend its border with Finland in addition to its Baltic borders and to consider a wider range of potential threat sources.¹⁵⁸ Russian maritime forces would face additional NATO sea denial forces tailored to the region capable of covering larger parts of the Baltic Sea, including the Gulfs of Finland and Bothnia. In particular, the closure of the Gulf of Finland would limit the ability of Russian forces (and possibly Russian merchant ships) to transit in and out of the St. Petersburg area.

Third, Swedish accession in particular provides new options for reinforcement, logistics, and sustainment operations. In addition to the traditional west-east GLOCs running from major

157 Daniels Kauliņš, "Sweden's Role in Baltic Defense," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, August 13, 2025, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/08/swedens-role-in-baltic-defense/>.

158 Besides the Finnish armed forces, these expanded forces and structures include the new FLF Finland multinational battle group as well as the Multi-Corps Land Component Command Northwest (MCLCC-NW) stood up in September 2025 in Mikkeli, Finland. The MCLCC-NW falls under the command of the Finnish Army and currently has personnel from multiple NATO member nations, including Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and the United States. deployed at the Mikkeli headquarters.

ports in Western Europe through Germany and Poland to NATO's border with Russia, those operations can now run through Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish ports across Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea. This places additional demands on any Russian A2/AD forces countering NATO reinforcement, logistics, and sustainment operations and provides NATO with more flexibility.

Towards a New Defense Concept for the Region

Strategically, Sweden and Finland's support to the Baltic states could enable a sea change in NATO strategy from one that traditionally has been an attrition-centric approach based primarily on frontline state defense and reinforcement in favor of a more offensive interdiction-centric approach. NATO's present post-2014 defense approach to the Baltics, a form of denial, rests heavily on the idea that military credibility hinged on the ability to rapidly respond, with a threat focus centered on a smaller-scale surprise attack.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, a primary concern, as described above, was to prevent an easy land grab. Thus, efforts focused on increased situational awareness and forward presence buttressed by forces with tiered readiness.¹⁶⁰ Overall, the strategy seems to emphasize a deterrence by denial approach through attrition—that is, stopping Russian aggression at the borders and inflicting as many costs on the Russian frontline forces as possible—using a combination of strengthened forward defense on the border with Russia and plans to rapidly bring in reinforcements.¹⁶¹

Since 2022, NATO has not seemed to make major changes to its strategy, though it has scaled up its efforts. For example, the alliance has increased the size of the four previous multinational battalion-sized “enhanced Forward Presence” (eFP) battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland to brigade-sized equivalents (now called “Forward Land Forces” (FLF)) and to create new battlegroups in Finland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.¹⁶² Allies also adopted a new NATO Force Model, which aims to resource the military plans with a much larger pool of ready forces.

159 Pihlajamaa and Särkkä, “Finland and Collective Defence: The Finnish Role in Northern Europe and Beyond.” See also: Robert Dalsjö et al., *Deterrence by Reinforcement: The Strengths and Weaknesses of NATO's Evolving Strategy*, ed. Eva Hagström Frisell (Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2019).

160 See, for example: Hagström Frisell and Agell, “NATO's return to deterrence and defence and early response to Russia's war against Ukraine” in Björn Ottosson et al, *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe Part II: The Evolving European Security Landscape - Political Tensions and Strategic Challenges toward 2030* (Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), July 2024), <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5623--SE>.

161 See, for example: William Alberque, “The History of NATO's New Defence Plans (2014-Present): SACEUR and the Strategy Gap,” *Geopolitics and Security Studies Center*, October 29, 2025, <https://www.gssc.lt/en/publication/the-history-of-natos-new-defence-plans-2014-present-saceur-and-the-strategy-gap/>; Albin Aronsson et al., “Towards a Realized Strategy,” in *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2024: Part III, NATO's Strategy for Deterrence and Defence towards 2030 - Matching Ambition and Capabilities*, (Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2024); Jakob Gustafsson and Eva Hagström Frisell, *A New Generation of Forward Defence: NATO in the Baltic States* (Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2025).

162 For an assessment of the progress that NATO had made on its 2022 pledges in 2024, see: Monaghan et al., *Is NATO Ready for War?* See also: NATO, “Strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank.”

However, there increasingly appear to be challenges to NATO's current approach of what might be called deterrence by reinforcement—even with the benefits that Sweden and Finland's membership bring. First, a strategy based on reinforcement is likely to be especially difficult if the United States were to reduce its role in NATO as well as the ground units that it provides the alliance. Although non-U.S. NATO members are increasing their investments in ground forces, the United States still provides a substantial portion of NATO's reinforcement ability.¹⁶³ If the number of U.S. reinforcements were significantly reduced, it is unclear if Russia would take the threat of reinforcement seriously or if Europe could sustain a protracted fight along the frontline.

Second, reinforcement may take time that the Baltic states may not feel they have.¹⁶⁴ Particularly after the horrors in Bucha, Ukraine in 2022, in which Russian forces murdered hundreds of residents, the idea of trading space for time is unappealing.¹⁶⁵ Third, military mobility issues that have plagued the alliance are still not resolved—even with the enhanced flexibility of SLOCs and ALOCs enabled by Sweden's accession.¹⁶⁶ Fourth, the C2 of the FLFs still requires clarification. Each of the FLFs in the Baltic states appears to operate under a different model.¹⁶⁷ This creates flexibility for the framework nation of each FLF but it also creates confused C2 and a requirement for rapid national decision-making procedures because there is no automatic FLF response in gray-zone crises.¹⁶⁸ A further challenge more specific to the defense of Finland, and especially northern Finland, is that only a limited number of allied units can operate in Finnish winter conditions.

More broadly, it is unclear if this approach will continue to effectively deter Russia. First, it is uncertain whether the local balance of forces can ever effectively favor NATO, particularly in the Baltic states given the constraints of geography. Although ground units could

163 On European ground forces, see, for example: Ben Barry et al., *The Future of NATO's European Land Forces: Plans, Challenges, Prospects* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023).

164 The Baltic states feel this problem acutely, given geography. Finland, with more depth may have a greater risk acceptance. Charly Salonijs-Pasternak, for example, notes: "You entice the enemy to move into territory you have prepared. Let nature do some of the work. In central Finland, there is lots of forest; in the north, there are bogs and marshland and in the far north it is very cold. We will rely on nature more than the Ukrainian or German steppes." Richard Milne et al., "Is Europe Prepared for War?," *Financial Times*, July 1, 2025.

165 *Ukraine: Russian Forces' Trail of Death in Bucha* (Human Rights Watch, 2022), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/21/ukraine-russian-forces-trail-death-bucha>. To buttress their borders and mitigate the risk of Russian incursion into Baltic territory, among other investments and programs, the Baltic states have been increasing the physical defenses along the borders with Russia and Belarus. See, for example: Ministry of Defence, Republic of Latvia, "Border Fortification," <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/border-fortification>.

166 Douglas Barrie et al., *Progress and Shortfalls in Europe's Defence: An Assessment*, ed. James Hackett and Benjamin Schreer (International Institute for Strategic Studies, September 2025), 52–53, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003715054>; Curtis M. Scaparrotti et al., *Moving out: A Comprehensive Assessment of European Military Mobility* (Atlantic Council, 2020), https://atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Moving-Out_Military-Mobility-Web.pdf.

167 Gustafsson and Frisell, *A New Generation of Forward Defence: NATO in the Baltic States*, (Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2025), <https://www.foi.se/en/foi/findreports/reportsummary.html?reportNo=FOI-R--5765--SE>.

168 Ibid, 13.

theoretically be surged in advance of a crisis, permanent forward presence is politically and economically costly and may never come to fruition.¹⁶⁹

Second, an approach that emphasizes frontline defense and attrition is likely to lead to protraction, since an attrition strategy relies on inflicting losses over time to halt advances rather than imposing intolerable losses quickly on the adversary. To deter Russia, therefore, NATO would need to have significant ground capacity and supporting logistics to credibly sustain protracted operations. Given the Baltic states' small size and population and the reluctance of some NATO member states to commit serious resources for purposes of coming to the defense of the Baltic region, such protraction may not be sustainable.

Furthermore, as has been seen for over four years in Ukraine, the Russians appear willing to endure enormous casualties and losses indefinitely in preference to failing to achieve their objective, and NATO's defense industrial base and manpower levels require significant improvement to assure long-term sustainability. NATO members are aware of the challenges and making progress (and a war could certainly hasten necessary improvements), but this area will likely remain a vulnerability for the short and medium term.

Third, and fundamentally, a frontline defense approach, which inherently reliant on attriting Russian forces, could fail to convince Russia not to invade given its ability to generate mass and its demonstrated relative insensitivity to casualties.

With these challenges in mind, NATO should consider adopting a new defense concept for the Northeast Quadrant's borders with Russia. Deterrence by denial can rest on two approaches: attrition, which entails inflicting sufficient quantities of losses on enemy personnel and platforms such that the adversary can no longer sustain operations, and interdiction, which entails directly interrupting the enemy's ability to sustain its campaign by targeting capabilities like mobilization, logistics, communications, and C2 nodes.¹⁷⁰ Thus far, NATO's approach in the Northeast Quadrant has seemed to emphasize attrition.

Looking forward, Sweden and Finland's accession to the alliance enables NATO to adopt a strategy in the Northeast Quadrant that better balances attrition with interdiction. Such an approach would entail two aspects: (1) a limited but viable forward presence and (2)

169 Ibid, 13–14. It should be noted, however, that the planned permanent basing of a German brigade (Panzer Brigade 45) in Lithuania is well underway and scheduled to be completed by the end of 2027.

170 A key Cold War example of interdiction is NATO's 1980s Follow-On-Forces Attack (FOFA) operational concept, which entailed delaying, disrupting, and destroying forces following the initial enemy assault echelons on NATO's Central Front with long-range weapons to attack enemy forces that had not yet engaged NATO forces in order to enable NATO defenses to hold as far forward as possible. Such attacks could occur from just behind the engaged troops to hundreds of kilometers inside enemy territory. See, for example: van Tol et al., *Deterrence and Defense in the Baltic Region: New Realities*, 61; U.S. Congress, *Technologies for NATO's Follow-On Forces Attack Concept* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986); U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, *New Technology for NATO: Implementing Follow-On Forces Attack* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987); Bernard W. Rogers, "Follow-On Forces Attack (FOFA): Myths And Realities," *Parameters* 15, no. 2 (1985), <https://www.proquest.com/openview/968d8170eed368431c2256f405b5196f/1?cbl=1819217&pq-origsite=gscholar>.

interdiction capabilities. Importantly, this would not necessitate removing NATO's forward ground presence and reducing reliance on reinforcement concepts; rather, the goal would be to require fewer forward units to make defense and deterrence more efficient and, ideally, more effective.

Limited but Viable Forward Defense

What would a limited but viable forward defense along NATO's Northeast Quadrant border with Russia entail? The goal of such a defense would be imposing meaningful delay and/or cost on any invading Russians, preventing Russian planners from seeing an invasion as "easy" and allowing NATO more time to ensure a balanced response, including through strike, without imposing untenable peacetime costs on NATO members and/or overemphasizing frontline defense at the cost of developing other capabilities that could complement frontline ground efforts. The force should be *limited* in size to reduce costs for NATO but be sufficiently robust to *viably* impose substantial costs on Russia. To do so requires investments and planning for both the frontline states and NATO more broadly.

Increasing the efficiency of border defense

First, nations along the border—primarily Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania¹⁷¹—should continue to harden their defensive lines.¹⁷² Such efforts are already underway. For example, the development of the Baltic Defense Line—a series of "anti-mobility defensive installations" along the Baltic states' borders with Russia and Belarus—was announced mid-January 2024.¹⁷³ In conjunction with this, the Baltic states, as well as Finland and Poland, have withdrawn from the 1997 Ottawa Treaty banning use of landmines and have either left or intend to leave the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions, further increasing defensive

171 We do not include the national defense of Poland in the Northeast Quadrant concept. However, several of these principles could apply to Poland as well. The Norwegian border with Russia is relatively short and is covered in the next chapter.

172 Lukas Milevski, "Manoeuvre Warfare in the Baltic: Political Imperatives and Tactical Conditions," *The RUSI Journal* 169, no. 6 (2024): 78–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2024.2407534>. Milevski argues that, despite the fact that NATO doctrine appears to be based off of maneuver warfare, a static defense makes more sense in the context of the Baltic states. Klein et al argue for NATO to adopt "area denial." Robert M. Klein et al., *Baltics Left of Bang: The Role of NATO with Partners in Denial-Based Deterrence* (Institute for National Strategic Studies (National Defense University), 2019), 20.

173 Republic of Estonia Ministry of Defence, "Baltic countries to build defensive installations on their borders," Republic of Estonia Ministry of Defence, January 19, 2024, <https://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/en/news/baltic-countries-build-defensive-installations-their-borders>; Centre for Defence Investments (Estonia), "Baltic Defence Line," Centre for Defence Investments (Estonia), <https://www.kaitseinvesteeringud.ee/en/baltic-defence-line/> (accessed April 17, 2026).

lethality. Thus, a reinforced positional and attritional “hedgehog” strategy is a core element underlying Baltic defense.¹⁷⁴

Ground forces—both national and NATO forward-deployed—in the border states should focus on increasing lethality and holding the line as opposed to pushing Russian forces back once they enter NATO territory. Rather than NATO’s traditional emphasis on maneuver warfare, frontline defensive units may focus more heavily on positional and attritional warfare.¹⁷⁵ Notably, there may be different approaches in different parts of the Northeast Quadrant. For example, in the Baltic states, where there is much less defensive depth and greater population density, ceding any territory may be intolerable. In Finland, however, temporarily ceding territory has always been understood as part of the national defense plan. To buttress defensive efforts, forces should have access to prepositioned (PREPO) equipment, materiel, and supplies—both along the frontline and in key logistics hubs, such as Sweden. Other efforts at increasing lethality could include increasing quantities of shorter-ranged precision-guided weapons (PGW), glide bombs,¹⁷⁶ and guided rockets, artillery, mortars, and missiles (G-RAMM).¹⁷⁷ Concurrently, these states should continue to invest more in societal resilience while NATO as a whole should increase investments in greater defense capacity against Russian air and missile attacks—whether through national purchases, multinational acquisition, or NATO procurement.

¹⁷⁴ On a hedgehog strategy, see: Klein et al., *Baltics Left of Bang: The Role of NATO with Partners in Denial-Based Deterrence*; Sean Monaghan, “The Sword, the Shield, and the Hedgehog: Strengthening Deterrence in NATO’s New Strategic Concept,” *War on the Rocks*, August 23, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/08/the-sword-the-shield-and-the-hedgehog-strengthening-deterrence-in-natos-new-strategic-concept/>; Jan Osburg, *Unconventional Options for the Defense of the Baltic States: The Swiss Approach* (RAND Corporation, February 5, 2016), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE179.html>. Poland is adopting a similar “hedgehog” defense approach characterized by dense physical barriers and advanced surveillance systems along its border with Belarus and Kaliningrad. This is part of its \$10 billion “Eastern Shield” (*Tarcza Wschód*) national security strategy. See, for example: Ellie Cook, “Poland Shows Hedgehog Defenses Laid Across Its Border,” *Newsweek*, January 27, 2026, <https://www.newsweek.com/poland-shows-hedgehog-defenses-laid-across-its-border-11421313>; and “Poland Shows Its ‘Dragon Teeth’ with Which It Wants to Stop a Russian Invasion (Photo),” *Spot*, January 28, 2026, <https://spotmedia.ro/en/news/news/poland-shows-its-dragon-teeth-with-which-it-wants-to-stop-a-russian-invasion-photo>.

¹⁷⁵ Lukas Mengelkamp and Sam Vincent, “Beyond Manoeuvre Theory for European Defence,” *Global Policy*, February 23, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70130>. Mengelkamp and Vincent argue that, instead of maneuver, NATO should rely more heavily on positional defense.

¹⁷⁶ Finnish Defence Forces Logistics Command, “SDB II Glide Bombs for Finnish Air Force F-35A Multirole Fighter Jets,” June 18, 2026, <https://puolustusvoimat.fi/en/-/sdb-ii-glide-bombs-for-finnish-air-force-f-35a-multirole-fighter-jets>.

¹⁷⁷ van Tol et al., *Deterrence and Defense in the Baltic Region: New Realities*.

Neutralizing Kaliningrad

Second, to enable a limited but viable forward defense, NATO would need to rapidly neutralize assets based in or operating from Kaliningrad.¹⁷⁸ Russian forces there pose multi-domain threats covering not only the Northeast Quadrant but also large areas of western Europe, including major ports as well as critical nodes along LOCs. The Baltic Fleet assets based there, while not expected to survive for long in a wartime scenario, could deny selected Baltic Sea areas for some time by employing sea mines, armed unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV), armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), and ground-based cruise missiles. Russian ground forces attacking from both Kaliningrad and Belarus could cut off the GLOCs from Poland to the Baltic states. Thus, reducing the threat posed by Kaliningrad would be exceptionally important for purposes of attriting Russian forces, reducing long-range precision-strike (LRPS) against critical targets in western Europe, neutralizing the immediate coastal maritime threat, limiting the mine warfare threat to maritime LOCs, and maintaining the north-south ground LOCs through Poland to the Baltics.

Whereas Kaliningrad had previously been a “cork” that provided a hardened forward salient with dense defenses, from the Russian perspective, it now faces a 360-degree NATO threat, making its air and missile defense challenge far greater and posing new neutralization threats.¹⁷⁹ The air threat posed by NATO forces in the region—including the budding joint Nordic air force—could be complemented by ground-based fires from Poland, Nordic states, and allied units operating in Lithuania (since most Lithuanian national forces would likely be tied up fighting Russian invaders along the border with Belarus). While actual occupation of Kaliningrad would be unlikely to occur early as long as significant Russian ground forces in defensive positions remained supplied, their ability to interfere with NATO LOCs across and over the Baltic Sea would be constrained.

Directly defending frontline states under attack

Third, NATO members would need to directly support any frontline states under attack. The Baltic militaries, while well-trained and highly capable, primarily due to their size and limited budgets lack key capabilities (such as strike aircraft) and especially sufficient weapons stockpiles to inflict losses that Russian leadership would find intolerable.¹⁸⁰ Positional attritional defense requires large volumes of fire to stop major assaults. Thus, supplementary air- or ground-based fires would need to come from NATO allies, particularly those in the region.¹⁸¹

178 Striking Kaliningrad could, of course, raise significant escalation concerns.

179 For more on the contemporary situation facing Kaliningrad, see, for example: Thomas Grove, “Tiny Russian Exclave Flexes Might in NATO’s Backyard,” *World, Wall Street Journal*, April 18, 2025.

180 van Tol et al., *Deterrence and Defense in the Baltic Region: New Realities*.

181 Baltic Sea littoral NATO members are acquiring sea-launched land-attack missiles, but in quantities that would not be meaningful in the context of stopping a Russian invasion in the Baltics.

The Nordic air forces—those of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland—are now in the process of deeply integrating with the objective of creating a single cohesive fighter force numbering over 250 modern strike-fighters (namely F-35s and Gripen) featuring harmonized command structures and shared logistics and facilities.¹⁸² Given their geographic proximity, Nordic aircraft could contribute significantly to missions along the frontline states such as interdiction strikes and close air support (CAS) over the Northeast Quadrant's border with Russia, defensive counter-air, and suppression and destruction of enemy air defenses (SEAD and DEAD). Note, however, that such missions would divert assets away from national homeland defense, a consideration which could cause some reluctance to commit too many assets to Baltic border defense missions. That said, aircraft from other allies could operate from bases and other locations in both Sweden and Finland and conduct the same missions.

Ground-based long-range precision strike (LRPS) launched from within the Northeast Quadrant could also support the defense of the frontline states. Both national and NATO allied LRPS units based in Sweden and Finland (and Poland) potentially could provide sustained fires over extended periods and at the same time be difficult targets for Russia to counterattack or otherwise neutralize. A 2017 RAND study suggested that from just two launch points—Northeast Poland and the islands off of Estonia—NATO forces could cover nearly all of the Baltics, much of Western Belarus, and all of Kaliningrad, and a 2022 CSBA study identified three rings within Europe that could be used to threaten much of the Russian homeland and the seas where its naval forces operate.¹⁸³

Other Northeast Quadrant capabilities could also contribute. For example, Swedish and Finnish missile corvettes, Swedish submarines, and other anti-surface warfare capabilities could support the defense of the Baltic states' coastal areas should Russia launch attacks from not just the land border but also from the sea. Doing so would allow these countries—and particularly Estonia, with its relatively large Baltic islands—to focus eastwards.¹⁸⁴

182 See, for example: Norwegian Armed Forces, "Four Nordic Air Forces Fighting as One," March 3, 2025, www.forsvaret.no/en/news/articles/nordic-division; NATO, "Nordic Air Forces Strengthen Interoperability over the Baltic Sea," May 22, 2025, <https://ac.nato.int/archive/2025-2/nordic-air-forces-strengthen-interoperability-over-the-baltic-sea->.

183 Timothy M. Bonds et al., *What Role Can Land-Based, Multi-Domain Anti-Access/Area Denial Forces Play in Deterring or Defeating Aggression?* (RAND Corporation, May 22, 2017), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1820.html; Eric Edelman et al., *Rings of Fire: A Conventional Missile Strategy for a Post-INF Treaty World* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2022).

184 Karlis Neretnieks, "The Islands in the Baltic Sea – Assets or a Problem for NATO?," *Kungl Krigsvetenskapsakademiens Handlingar och Tidskrift* 2024, no. 3 (2024), <https://kkrva.se/hot/2024:3/bihafte-neretnieks-oarna-i-ostersjon.pdf>.

Establishing air and sea denial in the Baltic Sea

Fourth, NATO forces would likely seek to establish an air and sea bubble or “mini-A2/AD complexes” over the Baltic Sea as rapidly as possible to facilitate a range of missions.¹⁸⁵ Operational objectives and tasks would include suppressing Russian IAMD systems; destroying Russian Baltic Sea units (including coastal anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM) launchers) and the three main Russian air force bases located in Kaliningrad; cutting air and sea LOCs to Kaliningrad to preclude resupply or reinforcement; preventing damage to critical underseas cables and pipelines; closing the Gulf of Finland to Russian vessels (including Baltic Fleet units based in St. Petersburg)¹⁸⁶; defending the eastern approaches (including Bornholm) to the Danish Straits against potential Russian anti-shipping attacks or mining operations; and preventing Russian “coup de main” attempts to seize and establish operating sites on key Baltic Sea islands including Gotland, Åland, and the Saaremaa and Hiiumaa islands off Estonia (see Figure 9).

Denial would be the predominant imperative, particularly at the start of any conflict.¹⁸⁷ The Baltic Sea favors a defensive operational concept, given its small size, shallow depth, and presence of chokepoints.¹⁸⁸ Mines have often been very effective in the region and have been used throughout history.¹⁸⁹ NATO and Northeast Quadrant members could take advantage of this geography: coastal defense can help provide local denial, and the presence of large numbers of islands, particularly in the northern half of the sea, can support ISR operations and forward deployment.¹⁹⁰

185 For a good overview, see Ott Laanemets, “Solve the Baltic’s Geography Problem,” *Proceedings*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2018/march/solve-baltics-geography-problem>. See also: Klein et al., *Baltics Left of Bang: The Role of NATO with Partners in Denial-Based Deterrence*. On “mini A2/AD complexes,” see: James P. Thomas and Evan Braden Montgomery, “Developing a Strategy for a Long-Term Sino-American Competition,” in Thomas Mahnken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century* (Stanford University Press, 2012), 266–67.

186 Finland and Estonia are already conducting joint contingency planning for this task. See Robin Häggblom, “Finnish-Estonian cooperation turning Baltic Sea into a NATO-lake,” *Naval News*, August 25, 2022, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/08/finnish-estonian-cooperation-turning-baltic-sea-into-a-nato-lake/>.

187 On Ukraine’s successful sea denial in the Black Sea, see Thane Clare, *A Navy of Necessity: Ukraine’s Unmanned Surface Vessels at War* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2025).

188 For an overview of the unique conditions of the Baltic Sea, see, for example: Savitz and Winston, *A Brief Naval Overview of the Baltic Sea Region*.

189 Stefan Lundqvist and Julian Pawlak, “Managing Maritime (In)Security on NATO’s Northern Flank,” *Proceedings* 151, no. 5 (May 2025), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2025/may/managing-maritime-insecurity-natos-northern-flank>; Ott Laanemets, “Reinventing Mine Warfare in the Baltic Sea,” *Proceedings* 150, no. 5 (2024), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/may/reinventing-mine-warfare-baltic-sea>.

190 Savitz and Winston, *A Brief Naval Overview of the Baltic Sea Region*; Henri Winberg, “NATO Needs an Island Chain Strategy for the Baltic Sea,” (Wilson Center, June 27, 2023), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/nato-needs-island-chain-strategy-baltic-sea>.

FIGURE 9: MAP OF THE BALTIC SEA

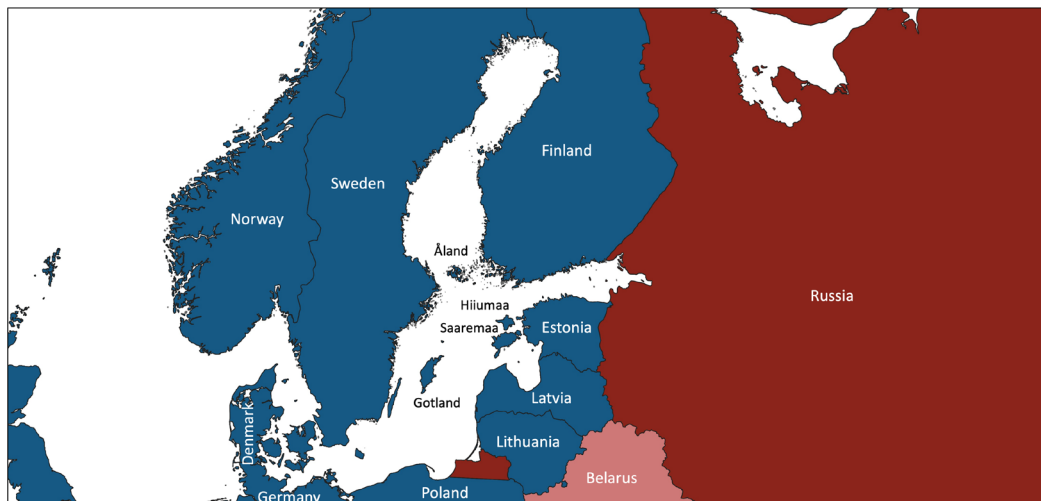


Image created by CSBA using QGIS and naturalearthdata.com.

There is an argument to be made for sea control, particularly to maintain commercial shipping flows within the Baltic Sea.¹⁹¹ Finland, for example, is often described as an “island” due to its critical reliance on shipping. However, full control seems unlikely and costly given Russian assets in the region, particularly early in a conflict. Instead, NATO might look for “windows of dominance,” in which NATO seeks to create moments for advantage and/or protects limited sea areas without seeking full control.¹⁹² Control may be possible later in a conflict. Increasing the capacity of transport routes between Sweden and Finland—to include existing rail and road corridors, maritime networks, and possibly a physical bridge over the Gulf of Bothnia between the two countries—could help supply Finland in the meantime.¹⁹³

In either approach, the Swedish island of Gotland—which has previously been described as a “floating aircraft carrier” off the east coast of Sweden—will be critical. The island, with an area of more than 3,000 km², could host sensors for early warning, SIGINT platforms, anti-submarine warfare helicopters, drones for maritime surveillance and operations in the Baltic states, anti-ship and land attack missile batteries to support the defense of the Baltic

191 On the shift from an existing approach based on denial to one of control, see, for example: Jan Henningsson and John Welsh, *Natomedlemskapets konsekvenser för sjödomänen: Ett diskussionsunderlag inför fortsatt förmågeutveckling* [Consequences of NATO Membership in the Sea Domain: A Discussion Paper for Continued Capability Development], FOI Memo 8446 (Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2024).

192 Peter Porkka and Vilho Rantanen, “Windows, Not Walls: Conceptualizing Air Superiority for Future Wars,” *War on the Rocks*, September 4, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/09/windows-not-walls-conceptualizing-air-superiority-for-future-wars/>; Dave Deptula and Christopher Bowie, *The Significance of Air Superiority: The Ukraine-Russia War*, Policy Paper (Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, July 2, 2024), <https://www.mitchellaerospacepower.org/the-significance-of-air-superiority-the-ukraine-russia-war/>.

193 Critical nodes along these routes would require appropriate protection.

states, among other capabilities.¹⁹⁴ Due to its strategic location, in the event of a crisis or conflict, Russia could attempt to quickly neutralize Gotland to try to cut off the island as a supply and strike hub.¹⁹⁵ Sweden, thus, will need to protect the island, a process which it has already begun.¹⁹⁶ Defending the demilitarized Finnish archipelago of Åland, located at the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia, will also be important; if Russia were able to place weapons systems there, the Russian Armed Forces could interdict sea traffic into Finnish ports, as well as disrupt transportation routes across the Baltic and the Gulf of Bothnia.¹⁹⁷

Strengthening NATO logistics and sustainment

Even if its strategy did not depend on a massive buildup of additional reinforcements, NATO would still need to resupply, relieve, and support forces along the frontline. Thus, protection and exploitation of the critical transportation nodes, links, and routes that constitute NATO LOCs is vital.¹⁹⁸

Long-time critical NATO LOC vulnerabilities still require substantial remediation. These vulnerabilities include the continuing mobility challenges to transporting reinforcements and supplies from major western European ports through Germany and Poland to the Baltic states and elsewhere along NATO's eastern frontier.¹⁹⁹ These remain germane and urgent regardless of the accession of Sweden and Finland into NATO, principally due to NATO's inherent dependence on major high-throughput ports like Rotterdam, Antwerp, and Bremen, as well as their associated transportation links.

However, Swedish and Finnish accession does have the potential to ease some of the traditional reinforcement and logistical concerns regarding the Baltic states (and Finland).

194 Neretnieks, "The Islands in the Baltic Sea – Assets or a Problem for NATO?"

195 See, for example: Karlis Neretnieks, *Militära Konsekvenser – Ur Mellanrapport Projekt SV-A-R Del II* [Military Consequences - from the Interim Report of the SV-A-R Project, Part II] (2025), <https://kkrva.se/militara-konsekvenser-ur-mellanrapport-projekt-sv-a-r-del-ii/>. However, this would be highly risk for Russia, especially if Sweden had increased defenses on the island. Even if the Russian forces managed to take it, keeping them supplied would be difficult. For an analysis of possible Russian operations to seize Gotland, see: Suzanne Freeman, "Are Current Russian Expeditionary Capabilities Capable of a Coup de Main in Sweden?" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 30, 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/are-current-russian-expeditionary-capabilities-capable-coup-de-main-sweden>.

196 Anna Wieslander and Eric Adamson, "A Glimpse of Sweden in NATO: Gotland Could Be a Game-Changer for Baltic Defense," (Atlantic Council, April 26, 2023), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/a-glimpse-of-sweden-in-nato-gotland-could-be-a-game-changer-for-baltic-defense/>.

197 Neretnieks, "The Islands in the Baltic Sea – Assets or a Problem for NATO?"

198 Key nodes include aerial and sea ports of debarkation (APOD/SPOD); prepositioned equipment, materiel, and supplies (PREPO); and sites of potential bottlenecks (e.g., rail and road bridges across major rivers). Links are the connections between nodes in a transportation network (e.g., high-volume rail and road links running from major western European ports to various destinations in eastern Europe).

199 For example, the Financial Times reported in 2025 that it would take about 45 days to move a major ground formation from ports in western Europe to the eastern frontier due to a variety of legal, physical, and other factors. Laura Pitel et al., "The Surreal 45-Day Trek at the Heart of Nato's Defence," EU Defence, *Financial Times*, November 18, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/0a07238e-3657-4d1b-8460-35cfc6f8cd66>. See also: Heinrich Brauss et al., *The CEPA Military Mobility Project* (Center for European Policy Analysis, March 2021), <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/the-cepa-military-mobility-project/>; Scaparrotti et al., *Moving Out*.

Finland has long maintained significant reserves of ordnance, spare parts, and other critical supplies (including for civilian needs), and has also begun stockpiling weapons and equipment in Norway in preparation for crises, with similar cooperation expected with Sweden.²⁰⁰ Sweden is sharply increasing its defense spending and plans to achieve NATO's 3.5 percent of GDP target by 2030.²⁰¹ A significant proportion is anticipated to go towards acquisition of advanced military systems, critical enablers, and renovation of facilities and sites that fell into disuse after the end of the Cold War. Norway is similarly investing in force modernization and expansion and also maintains a robust defense industrial base for production of missile systems, air defense, and naval equipment.

These investments by Sweden and Finland, coupled with their extant combat capabilities relevant to Northeast Quadrant defense, as well as comparatively strong defense industrial bases, have significant positive implications for easing some of NATO logistics and sustainment burdens and vulnerabilities, particularly as these pertain to defense of the Baltic region. Both bring substantial military capabilities and capacities to the alliance, which are at the same time located proximately to the Baltic states, hence do not require significant time to arrive in the area of operations.

Intra-NATO agreements as well as bilateral DCAs between the United States and both Sweden and Finland allow U.S. and other NATO allies to operate from bases in those countries as well as preposition equipment and supplies at dispersed locations. This correspondingly reduces the amount of equipment and supplies that otherwise would need to flow over longer, vulnerable pre-2022 LOCs.

Swedish geography also opens up cross-Baltic Sea routes, for example by opening up a sea port of debarkation (SPOD) in Gothenburg. In addition to the sea denial and sea control objectives described above, if the Swedish navy were to adopt a role of escorting resupply across the Baltic Sea, it would need to adapt not only the capabilities but also the service culture necessary to operate far from Swedish coastlines.

Interdiction Capabilities

The tasks described above to enhance the defense of NATO's border with Russia in the Northeast Quadrant are not easy but are facilitated by Sweden's and Finland's accession to the alliance—with the right investments and strategies. To reinforce these efforts, NATO should also invest more in interdiction capabilities aimed at making it more difficult for Russia to amass, reinforce, and sustain its offensive forces.

200 Milne et al., "Is Europe Prepared for War? Finland boosts war readiness in face of Russian aggression," *Financial Times*, May 6, 2024, <https://ft.com/content/cf28a55d31d2-433a-a651-e582cca28fa5>.

201 Jonas Olsson, "Sweden Targets \$30B Increase in Defense Spending, to Hit 3.5% of GDP by 2030," *Breaking Defense*, March 26, 2025, <https://breakingdefense.com/2025/03/sweden-targets-30b-increase-in-defense-spending-to-hit-3-5-of-gdp-by-2030/>.

Adding a strong multi-layered strike capacity would have three primary benefits. First, it would better exploit NATO geography in the Northeast Quadrant, taking advantage of a continuous west-east geographic depth that was not there prior to Swedish and Finnish membership. Placing different forms of strike in different regions of the Northeast Quadrant would spread strike capabilities along NATO's new rear-area depth.²⁰² For example, NATO strike assets in Finland and the Baltic states, with a smaller number of available bases and facing greater threat densities from Russian strike assets, could focus on ground-launched weapons (especially concealable and/or mobile ones) to strike primarily tactical targets.²⁰³ Thus, these states could concentrate investments in mostly mobile/concealable ground-launched shorter-ranged PGWs to maximize volumes of fire and to increase the difficulty of effective Russian counterbattery fires.

Sweden, Germany, and perhaps western Poland, with more air bases and further removed from many Russian strike assets, could feature a mix of ground-launched and air-delivered weapons with relatively longer ranges and a focus on tactical targets as well as targets with greater operational effect. Sea-launched missiles could also be considered. Finally, the more geographically remote members of the Northeast Quadrant, such as Norway and Denmark but also potentially including the United Kingdom given its interest in the region, could invest in extended-range ground-launched and air-delivered weapons in smaller quantities to hold more sensitive targets at risk. Such an approach would also mitigate the lack of strategic depth in the Baltic states by holding at risk targets located deeper into Russian territory.

Second, an interdiction approach could play on existing Russian vulnerabilities and concerns while also helping to degrade some of their deep strike capabilities.²⁰⁴ The approach could make Russia's vast geography more of a liability, since the Russian military could feel compelled to dedicate greater resources to air and missile defense (AMD), given that Russian leaders have traditionally been concerned about air and missile threats coming from NATO.²⁰⁵ Ukraine's strikes against targets deep in Russia demonstrate how long-range strike can effectively hold Russian territory at risk.²⁰⁶

202 This is similar to an approach developed in Edelman et al., *Rings of Fire: A Conventional Missile Strategy for a Post-INF Treaty World*.

203 For a specific illustrative description of how tactical-level interdiction operations could be used in a Russian invasion of the Baltics scenario to slow Russian operational and logistical timelines, see Lukas Milevski, "Targeting the Russian Rear Zone in a Hypothetical Baltic War," (Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 13, 2026), 5015, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2026/03/targeting-the-russian-rear-zone-in-a-hypothetical-baltic-war/>.

204 On deterrence and conventional prompt strike, see: Sidharth Kaushal, *A Net Assessment of Russian and NATO Capabilities in a Modern Strike Campaign*, with Juliana Suess (Royal United Services Institute, 2025).

205 Adamsky, *Moscow's Aerospace Theory of Victory: Western Assumptions and Russian Reality*; Michael Kofman et al., *Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts* (Center for Naval Analysis, 2021), 21–25.

206 Alistair MacDonald and Daria Matviichuk, "Ukraine's Growing Drone Armada Is Overwhelming Russia's Air Defenses," *Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2026, https://www.wsj.com/world/ukraines-growing-drone-armada-is-overwhelming-russias-air-defenses-d123064c?mod=world_lead_story.

Holding targets at risk within Russian territory could compel Russia to disperse its strike assets across a wider area to protect a larger number of targets. Furthermore, developing offensive strike capabilities that can hold Russia's own deep strike capabilities at risk can complement European air and missile defense efforts.²⁰⁷ As Estonian Defense Minister Hanno Pevkur has said, "It's much easier to destroy the nest than kill the birds in the air."²⁰⁸

Third, an interdiction approach, if properly supported by Northeast Quadrant members, could help rebalance U.S. contributions to defense of the region by air and ground forces and assets towards supporting capabilities like major logistics hubs, ISR, and targeting capabilities. These types of contributions may be more palatable to Washington than ground forces, especially should the United States elect to reduce its force presence in Europe.

To enable an approach with a greater emphasis on interdiction, members of the Northeast Quadrant would need to build a robust strike capacity and a "strike culture," both of which they have lacked to date.²⁰⁹ Member states would need to acquire a mix of air-delivered and ground-launched stand-off medium- and long-range weapons and associated enablers. In addition to strike capabilities, there would need to be heavy investments in multi-layered IAMD and battle management systems to protect launch points from attack, another serious deficiency at present. To support a strike culture and demonstrate actual strike capability for deterrence purposes, European NATO states would have to conduct recurrent exercises and demonstrations focused on strike operations.

207 Lotje Boswinkel, "Europe, Deterrence, and Long-Range Strike," *War on the Rocks*, March 20, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/03/europe-deterrence-and-long-range-strike/>; Fabian Hoffmann, "Denial Won't Do: Europe Needs a Punishment-Based Conventional Counterstrike Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, September 8, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/09/denial-wont-do-europe-needs-a-punishment-based-conventional-counterstrike-strategy/>. See also: Edelman et al., *Rings of Fire: A Conventional Missile Strategy for a Post-INF Treaty World*.

208 Milne et al., "Is Europe Prepared for War?"

209 See, for example: Fabian Hoffman, "Denial Won't Do: Europe Needs a Punishment-Based Conventional Counterstrike Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, September 8, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/09/denial-wont-do-europe-needs-a-punishment-based-conventional-counterstrike-strategy/>.

CALLOUT BOX: INTERDICTION TARGETING

Western military doctrine has generally divided the areas beyond an enemy's front into three geographic zones: front/close; rear; and deep. The front/close zone may be considered the broad zone of direct contact between the respective forces, where targets may be mostly military or infrastructure directly supporting ongoing combat interactions. The rear area is where new units, manpower, and materiel from the deep zone are channeled into the close battle area. The deep zone essentially comprises the enemy's home territory behind the rear area.

An interdiction-centric approach in the context of a large-scale Russian invasion of the Baltic region scenario has two distinct aspects: the first at the tactical level where major combat is occurring, the second at the operational and/or the strategic level.

At the tactical level, interdiction strikes would focus on cutting key nodes and links in the rear area lines of approach to the close battlespace such as major road and rail bridges across rivers in Russian and Belarussian territory, assembly areas, large supply depots, and so forth, to slow down Russian operational timelines, significantly impede tactical level logistics and sustainment flows, and inhibit force concentrations. As noted earlier, frontline states like the Baltics would tend to rely on significant numbers of mobile, ground-based relatively cheap PGWs (which could now include armed drones) that could nominally reach 30-50 kilometers into Russian rear areas.

At the operational level, longer-range fires could be employed against high-value targets further back in the rear area or in parts of the deep zone. Illustrative targets could include aircraft, missile batteries, air bases (particularly fuel storage and fuel transfer points rather than runways), command centers, and high-leverage transport nodes to impede operational level logistics and sustainment flows. Strike campaign objectives would include disrupting Russian force generation and imposing significant resource costs and losses.

European countries, including all the Northeast Quadrant states, have already made strides in this direction, although more should be done.²¹⁰ In June 2023, then-NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană identified deep precision strike as one of the alliance's "top priorities," noting that it would "offer offensive options for the defense of Allies and complicate our adversaries' military planning and operations."²¹¹ Within the Northeast Quadrant, both Poland and Finland have contracted to purchase JASSM-ER, a stealthy air-launched cruise missile with a reported range of up to 1,000 km.²¹² Germany produces the

210 See, for example: Douglas Barrie et al., *Deep Precision Strike: Europe's Quest for Long-Range Missile Capabilities* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025); Sidharth Kaushal, *Conventional Prompt Strike in European Military Power* (Royal United Services Institute, 2026). See also: Fabian Hoffmann, "A European Sonderweg in Long-Range Strike," *Missile Matters* Substack newsletter — with Fabian Hoffmann, April 5, 2026, <https://missilematters.substack.com/p/a-european-sonderweg-in-long-range>.

211 "NATO Deputy Secretary General Addresses European Air and Missile Defence Conference," Press Release, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), accessed April 15, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2023/06/19/nato-deputy-secretary-general-addresses-european-air-and-missile-defence-conference>.

212 Gareth Jennings, "Poland signs for hundreds of JASSM-ER long-range cruise missiles," *Janes*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-news/defence/poland-signs-for-hundreds-of-jassm-er-long-range-cruise-missiles>; Missile Threat, "JASSM/JASSM ER," (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024), <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/jassm>; *Yle News*, "Finland acquiring long-range JASSM cruise missiles," *Yle News*, June 4, 2024, <https://yle.fi/a/74-20092237>.

Taurus air-launched cruise missile and has spelled out plans to acquire LRPS.²¹³ Norway and Germany are jointly developing a supersonic anti-ship missile, the 3SM Tyrfin, which aims to have a range of between 800 and 1,000 km.²¹⁴ In 2025, both Sweden and Denmark expressed their intentions to purchase long-range strike systems with ranges of up to 2,000 km.²¹⁵ ²¹⁶ Poland has wide-ranging interests in LRPS, and is procuring substantial numbers of high-end weapons.²¹⁷

Smaller states are also investing in long-range strikes. The Baltic states, for example, are procuring HIMARS launchers with ATACMS missiles and have expressed interest in the Precision Strike Missile (PrSM).²¹⁸ Capabilities are not the only needed investment: doctrine, understanding escalation dynamics, and exercises and signaling are also necessary. For example, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom are partners in the European Long-Range Strike Approach (ELSA) project, which was founded with the goal of developing long-range strike options.²¹⁹ However, that project still lacks clarity in doctrine and ambitions, with different states appear to offer different rationales.²²⁰

213 Barrie et al., *Deep Precision Strike*.

214 "Signs Development Contract for Supersonic Strike Missile (3SM)," Press Release, *Kongsberg Defence & Aerospace*, Kongsberg, July 5, 2024, <https://www.kongsberg.com/newsroom/news-archive/2024/kongsberg-signs-development-contract-for-supersonic-strike-missile-3sm/>; Alex Luck, "New 3SM 'Tyrfin' Missile Receives German Development Funding," *Naval News*, July 1, 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/07/new-3sm-tyrfin-missile-receives-german-development-funding/>.

215 Johan Ahlander, "Sweden Wants Long-Range Weapon Systems Able to Strike inside Russia," *Reuters*, November 25, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/sweden-wants-long-range-weapon-systems-able-strike-inside-russia-2025-11-25/>.

216 Rudy Ruitenber, "Denmark to field long-range strike weapons in bid to deter attacks," *Defense News*, September 18, 2025, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/09/18/denmark-to-field-long-range-strike-weapons-in-bid-to-deter-attacks/>.

217 Barrie et al., *Deep Precision Strike*, 17.

218 Hanno Pevkur, Dovilė Šakalienė, and Andris Sprūds, "Joint Communiqué of the Baltic Defence Cooperation Ministerial Committee," Vilnius, Lithuania, January 23, 2025, <https://kam.lt/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/3B-Komunikatas.pdf>; Richard Thomas, "Baltics ATACMS Production Underway after Earlier US HIMARS Deals," *Army Technology*, July 3, 2024, <https://www.army-technology.com/news/baltics-atacms-production-underway-after-earlier-us-himars-deals/>; Hoffmann, "A European Sonderweg in Long-Range Strike."

219 France, Germany, Italy, and Poland were the original signatories. Lee Ferran, "Let It Go (Long): France Joins Germany, Italy and Poland in New ELSA Long-Range Missile Project," *Breaking Defense*, July 12, 2024, <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/07/let-it-go-long-france-joins-germany-italy-and-poland-in-new-elsa-long-range-missile-project/>. The UK and Sweden joined later in the year. Tony Osborne, "UK, Sweden Join European Ground-Launched Cruise Missile Effort," *Aviation Week*, October 21, 2024, <https://aviationweek.com/defense/missile-defense-weapons/uk-sweden-join-european-ground-launched-cruise-missile-effort>. See also Jonas Olsson, "Swedish Defense Minister: ELSA Long-Range Strike Development Driven by Ukraine Lessons," *Breaking Defense*, October 30, 2024, <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/10/swedish-defense-minister-elsa-long-range-strike-development-lesson-from-ukraine/>.

220 Barrie et al., *Deep Precision Strike*.

The paucity of robust air and missile defenses in much of Europe reinforces the importance of developing strike capabilities and capacity.²²¹ Although NATO members do have capable AMD systems, they lack capacity. Furthermore, many members rely on either U.S.-made systems or U.S.-operated systems that are deployed to Europe—a point of sensitivity particularly as many European states are questioning the long-term U.S. commitment to Europe’s defense.²²² NATO seeks to quadruple its AMD capacity, a requirement that not only may be out of reach fiscally but might also still fall well short of what it truly needs to defend all of Europe.²²³ In other words, denying Russia’s ability to impose costs on NATO by striking numerous European targets would be limited in the event of a major conflict. Thus, at the strategic level, credible strategic deterrence may be achievable only through the ability to impose commensurate costs on Russia—suggesting that a Northeast Quadrant strike capability and capacity would not only be important in wartime but also as a deterrent.

Roles and Investments

In order to implement a revised approach to defending NATO’s Northeast Quadrant border with Russia, one that balances a limited but viable frontline defense with interdiction, several steps must be taken. First, Northeast Quadrant members should develop a common threat and operating picture with common priorities and perspectives. Germany, for example, traditionally views the Baltic primarily as a maritime problem, Sweden and Finland often see it through a coastal defense lens, and the Baltic states are most concerned about territorial defense.²²⁴ NATO adopting the concept of the Northeast Quadrant and holding planning discussions around the quadrant would be an important first step.

At a more practical level, the frontline states—the Baltic states and Finland—should continue their defensive investments, particularly in IAMD. They should also consider additional ways to impose costs on the frontline, including through shorter-range strike and closing the Gulf of Finland. Finland may also consider ways to help draw attention away from the Baltic states, such as increasing military activities in its north to constitute an implicit threat to Russian assets within the Kola Peninsula, making it more difficult for Russia to concentrate forces facing Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Finland should also consider ways

221 The analysis of European air and missile defense in this paragraph draws from Barrie et al., *Progress and Shortfalls in Europe’s Defence*, (International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), September 2025), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/progress-and-shortfalls-in-europes-defence-an-assessment/introduction>.

222 The then-cancellation of the sale of Tomahawk missiles to Germany illustrates this uncertainty. See Paul McCleary, Stephanie Bolzen, and Chris Lunday, “Pentagon likely to cancel missile deal with Germany over fears of Russia,” *Politico*, June 4, 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/06/04/us-germany-tomahawks-missiles-cancel-00950284>. However, the U.S. subsequently approved the sale of Tomahawks to Germany following the July 2026 NATO Summit meeting in Ankara.

223 Barrie et al., *Progress and Shortfalls in Europe’s Defence*, chap. 3.

224 Sebastian Bruns, “From ‘Flooded Meadow’ to Maritime Hotspot: Keeping the Baltic Sea Free, Open, and Interconnected” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 20, 2023), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/12/from-flooded-meadow-to-maritime-hotspot-keeping-the-baltic-sea-free-open-and-interconnected?lang=en>.

it can directly support defense of the Baltic states under attack, particularly employing its strike capabilities.

Sweden should take a leadership role in the region and particularly in the Baltic Sea.²²⁵ It is already planning to take the lead on various matters of connectivity and logistics support. For example, Stockholm has identified the town of Enköping, west of Stockholm, as the future site for a sizable logistics base to support NATO troop movements, with the ability to handle logistics of potential movements up to the division level.²²⁶ As part of these efforts, Sweden should continue investments in resilient connectivity, PREPO sites, and hardening. With its previously-discussed naval capabilities tailored to the Baltic Sea, Sweden is well-placed to lead alliance efforts there. To support this, the Swedish Navy, which has traditionally focused on archipelagic and coastal defense, will need to undertake a doctrinal shift to become more accustomed to operating in the more distant areas within the Baltic Sea. Sweden should invest further in its coastal defense and land-based anti-ship missiles, as well as continue to evaluate the use of mines both defensively and offensively.²²⁷

Norway should develop long-range strike doctrine and capabilities, as well as invest in its connectivity to Sweden and Finland.²²⁸ As the host of the NATO Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC), Norway could also lead the coordination of Northeast Quadrant air operations. It could also host additional PREPO locations.²²⁹ Poland and Germany should increase their Baltic Sea presence to support sustainment and logistics. Germany should also continue to increase its forward presence in the Baltic states, particularly in Lithuania, where it is the framework nation for the FLF. Both should also improve their military mobility and GLOC infrastructure. Denmark should assume defensive responsibility for the Danish Straits, including defending and utilizing Bornholm for fires and AMD. It should invest in long-range strike while maintaining its force commitments to the Forward Land

225 Särkka counters this suggestion, arguing that, “While the three Nordic countries may act as local hubs or niche capability providers, their capabilities are not extensive enough to deter and defend the entire Baltic Sea maritime region.” Särkka, “Nodal Defense and the Power of the Minilaterals in the Baltic Sea Region,” 44.

226 John Granlund, “Sverige Och Enköping Blir Logistikkbas För Natos Trupprörelser i Norr [Sweden and Enköping to Become Logistics Base for NATO Troop Movements in the North],” *SVT Nyheter*, August 21, 2025, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/sverige-och-enkoping-blir-logistikkbas-for-natos-trupprorrelser-i-norr>.

227 In 2023, the Swedish Armed Forces asked the government to allow them to lay mines in crisis moments. Sweden has also expressed its desire to jointly acquire sea mines. “Försvarsmakten Vill Kunna Lägga Ut Sjöminor i Svenska Vatten – Även i Fredstid [The Armed Forces Want to Be Able to Lay Sea Mines in Swedish Waters - Even in Peacetime],” *SVT Nyheter*, June 2, 2023, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/forsvarsmakten-vill-kunna-lagga-ut-sjominor-i-svenskt-vatten-aven-i-fredstid>; “Försvarsministern: Sverige Ska Köpa in Sjöminor,” *DN Direkt, Dagens Nyheter*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.dn.se/direkt/2024-07-09/forsvarsministern-sverige-ska-kopa-in-sjominor/>. On coastal defense and land-based anti-ship missiles, see: Swedish Ministry of Defense, *Stärkt försvarsförmåga: Sverige som allierad [Strengthened defense capability: Sweden as an ally]* (Regeringskansliet, 2024), 25.

228 Currently, roads in Norway primarily run north to south, while roads in Sweden and Finland mostly run east to west. There are plans to build a railway between the three countries. John C. K. Daly, “Finland, Sweden, and Norway to Build a Railway to Transport Troops and Weaponry to Russian Border,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 22, no. 75 (2025), <https://jamestown.org/program/finland-sweden-and-norway-to-build-a-railway-to-transport-troops-and-weaponry-to-russian-border/>.

229 Norway already hosts a prepositioning program with the U.S. Marine Corps.

Forces in Latvia and Finland. Other states in NATO should commit to bolstering the defense of the Baltic states, as several already do.

Meanwhile, the United States will remain important to the region, particularly in the provision of supporting and enabling capabilities. For example, U.S. space-based capabilities can provide critical targeting information to Northeast Quadrant members as they plan for greater interdiction operations. The United States will also likely need to continue providing C2 support for the foreseeable future.²³⁰ In addition, Washington might consider providing logistical and sustainment support. Both of these contribution categories are more fungible and do not necessarily require troops on the ground. Direct combat contributions would, of course, be meaningful and would significantly strengthen deterrence and defense in the region—but as the United States considers its priorities elsewhere, the Northeast Quadrant concept could provide a revised model for U.S. support to Europe by emphasizing its fungible capabilities.

Sweden and Finland's membership in the alliance and conceptualizing the Northeast Quadrant as one unified Area of Operations (AO) can facilitate a regionally based shift in NATO strategy that could significantly strengthen the deterrence and defense of NATO's most threatened borders, and perhaps especially so if future U.S. commitments to NATO were reduced. This enhancement, however, is not automatic; investments in capability, capacity, and operational plans will need to be undertaken seriously and in a timely fashion, particularly in key areas such as IAMD, resilience, and battle management systems where European NATO capabilities and or capacities are insufficient. Efforts to address such deficiencies should be accelerated regardless of whether potential reductions in U.S. contributions to the alliance are actually realized. If they are, the full potential of Sweden and Finland's membership in the alliance can be met. Importantly, in so doing, NATO can also enhance overall European deterrence and defense even as the United States considers reducing its role in NATO.

230 For an examination of how Europe could transition to more responsibility for command, see: Palmer and Simón, *Rebalancing NATO's Command*.

CHAPTER 4

Defending the High North

Sweden and Finland's NATO membership not only creates new possibilities for defending the Northeast Quadrant's border with Russia, but it also creates new challenges and opportunities in the upper, northernmost portion of the Quadrant, including its Arctic maritime spaces, which encompasses the High North. Even as the alliance defends the Baltic littoral states region against Russia, it must also defend the High North and defend against any threats emanating from it. This entails defending Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish territory north of the Arctic Circle as well as the maritime areas—namely the Norwegian and Barents seas—that border that region.

The Northeast Quadrant's High North holds several crucial interests for NATO and its member states. First, several NATO countries have territory that lies above the Arctic Circle and within the Arctic waters to their north. Indeed, Sweden and Finland's membership in the alliance has drawn increased attention to the High North.²³¹ The Cap of the North—the body of land crossing Norway, Sweden, and Finland above the Arctic Circle—is sparsely populated, but contains important resources, including iron ore, fisheries, and offshore petroleum resources (in the case of Norway). Norway's Svalbard archipelago, located at the convergence of the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans, offers a key location to monitor the Russian Northern Fleet, provides a home for important scientific research activities and has access to natural resources including fish and mineral deposits. The Andøya Rocket Range in Norway and the Esrange Space Center in Sweden, which provide satellite launch and research facilities to Northern Europe, are both located in the region. NATO's northernmost military facilities on the European continent are also located there, supporting deterrence, surveillance, and power projection into the northern parts of Russia and within the High North.

²³¹ Anna Wieslander, "How Sweden and Finland's Membership in NATO Affects the High North," (Atlantic Council, November 5, 2024), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/how-sweden-and-finlands-membership-in-nato-affects-the-high-north/>.

Second, the North Atlantic waters off the coast of the Northeast Quadrant are likely to become vital sea lines of communication for reinforcement, logistics, and sustainment. These routes were previously more focused on ports in western Europe such as Rotterdam, but as discussed in Chapter 4, Sweden's accession to NATO adds new west-east supply routes that will increase the importance of ports in Norway and Sweden like Narvik, Tromsø, and Gothenburg. These ports could be used for transatlantic shipments coming from the United States and Canada, but even if the United States were to reduce its role in NATO, those ports could also be used for intra-European shipping (for example, from the United Kingdom and the Dutch ports to the Nordic area).

Third, Russia—which has invested heavily in its Arctic military presence—could pose a range of threats to NATO in and from the European High North, including interdiction, distraction, seizure, and expansion.²³² Russia could *interdict* NATO shipments or units crossing the Atlantic, transiting European waters, or overflying Nordic airspace. Russia could also attempt to *distract* NATO by launching aggression in the upper areas of the Northeast Quadrant while simultaneously launching attacks on other parts of the Quadrant (for example, the Baltic states) or elsewhere in NATO territory. Finally, Russia could attempt to *seize* territory in the Cap of the North or in Svalbard. It could seek to capture areas within the former to provide the Kola Peninsula greater defensive depth to better protect its assets there, while Svalbard could be assaulted to take advantage of the archipelago's strategic position or, similar to a “snatch and grab” of a piece of land in the Baltic states, to undermine the credibility of the alliance. In the event of a conflict, Russia is also likely to work to facilitate secure passage into the North Atlantic Ocean for submarines armed with long-range weapons that could target the United States and other NATO members; threaten NATO countries from High North waters; and, perhaps most importantly, strengthen defense of its inner (i.e., Barents Sea) and outer (i.e., Barents into Norwegian Seas toward the GIUK Gap) SSBN bastions.

Treating the Northeast Quadrant as one unified area of operations could allow NATO to more comprehensively take advantage of Swedish and Finnish membership and strengthen this important region. As described earlier, the High North is militarily inseparable from the Baltic Sea region, and Russia is likely to impose threats in both areas. Swedish and Finnish membership not only bring increased attention to the connectivity between the Baltic and the Arctic, but their accession also enables new approaches.

Operational Requirements to Defend the High North

As NATO seeks to protect the upper, northern areas of the Northeast Quadrant and counter Russian threats of interdiction, distraction, and seizure, its principal operational tasks are to

232 Grisé et al., *Russia in the High North*.

defend member state territory in the Cap of the North and Svalbard and to protect alliance members against Russian maritime threats originating from High North waters.

Defense of the Cap of the North and Svalbard

Russia may target the Cap of the North for several reasons. First, it may seek to seize territory there to gain more defensive depth for the protection of its strategic forces based on the Kola Peninsula. These forces are important for homeland defense and great power status, and as Russia reconstitutes and rebuilds its conventional forces, it may concurrently rely increasingly on nuclear threats, including from its Northern Fleet SSBNs.²³³ Thus, it may choose to respond to what many Russian analysts perceive as the encroachment of NATO forces operating close to the Kola Peninsula by seeking to secure more “breathing room” for its nuclear forces based there.²³⁴ Russia could then use access provided by any gained territory to further reinforce its naval bastion in the Norwegian and Barents seas.²³⁵ An attack through Finnmark—the northern area of Norway that abuts the Russian border—could help Russia buttress its control over “inner” (nuclear weapons launch areas) and “outer” (protection zones) bastion areas where Russian SSBNs and ASW forces protecting them would be operating.²³⁶ A doctrine focused on rapid breakthrough and the imbalance between the importance of the Kola Peninsula and the relatively few Russian units in the region could incentivize Russian forces to strike early in a conflict.²³⁷

Second, Russia could seek to improve its ability to move naval units through the “Bear Gap”—referring to the waters running between Norway’s North Cape (not to be confused with the “Cap of the North”) and the Svalbard archipelago (see Figure 10)—by seizing northern NATO member state territory (primarily Norwegian).²³⁸ It could then operate military forces from there both to threaten NATO assets approaching the gap and to facilitate the passage of Russian units seeking to pass through it. If Russian forces were to seize Norwegian airfields and ports in the far north through a *coup du main*, NATO’s ability to operate and support its own air and naval forces in northern Scandinavia would become significantly constrained,

233 Elgin, *More of the Same? The Future of the Russian Military and Its Ability to Change*; Andrea Kendall-Taylor et al., *Assessing the Evolving Russian Nuclear Threat* (Center for a New American Security, 2023), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/assessing-the-evolving-russian-nuclear-threat>.

234 On these perceptions, see Grisé et al., *Russia in the High North*.

235 See, for example: Karlis Neretnieks, “Nato Och Den Nordisk/Baltiska Regionen – Ett Strategiskt Och Operativt Bedömande [NATO and the Nordic/Baltic Region - A Strategic and Operational Assessment],” *Kungl Krigsvetenskapsakademiens Handlingar Och Tidskrift* (2024), no. 2 (June 2024), <https://kkrva.se/nato-och-den-nordisk-baltiska-regionen-ett-strategiskt-och-operativt-bedomande/>.

236 Moregård, *Nordic Response 2024*.

237 Amund Osflaten, “The Russian Way of Regular Warfare and the Arctic,” in *Defending NATO’s Northern Flank: Power Projection and Military Operations*, VitalBook file, ed. Lon Strauss and Njord Wegge, Contemporary Security Studies (Routledge, 2024).

238 Bear Island lies on the line between the North Cape and the Svalbard archipelago, thereby giving the gap its colloquial name.

thereby making it far harder to conduct sea and air denial operations in and over the Norwegian Sea.²³⁹

FIGURE 10: MAP OF THE EUROPEAN HIGH NORTH

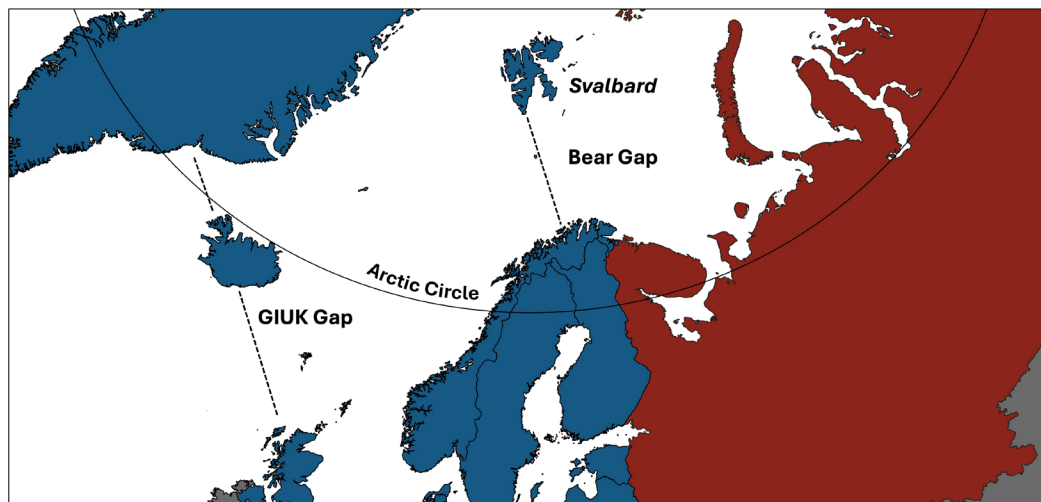


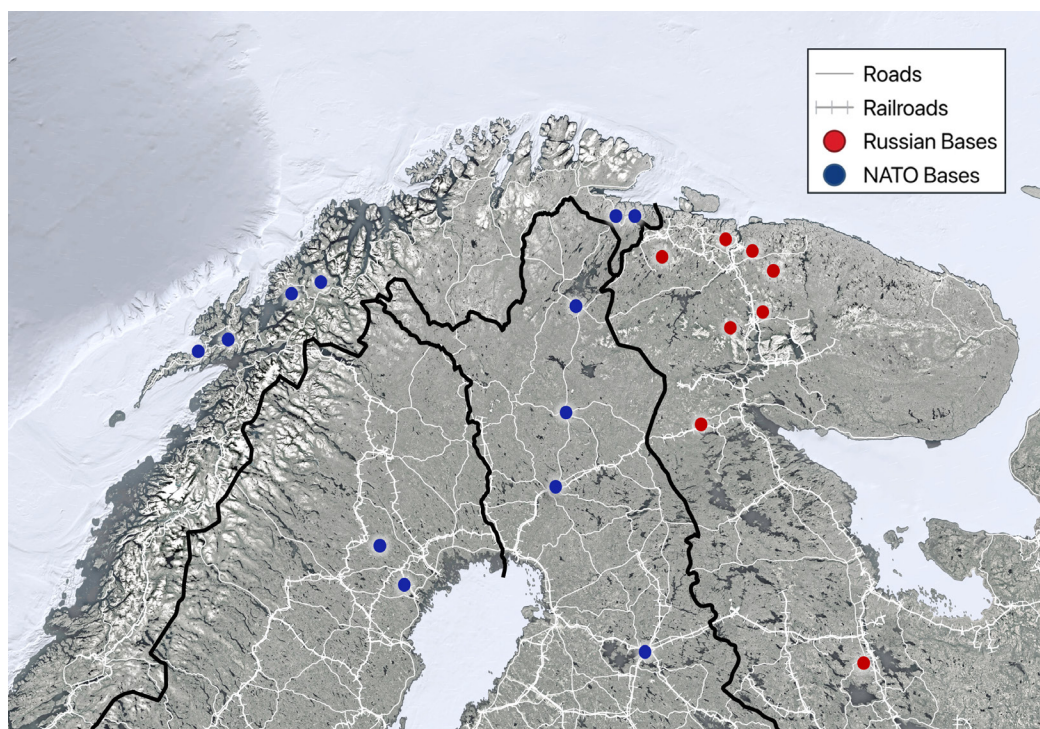
Image created by CSBA using QGIS and naturalearthdata.com.

Third, Russia could launch a limited invasion of or other attack on the Cap of the North in order to divert NATO attention from attacks elsewhere. Preventing Russian forces from seizing territory in the Cap of the North is important to preclude potential spillover effects on combat operations in other parts of the Northeast Quadrant and potentially in other NATO territory as well.

Operations in the Cap of the North are inherently challenging—for both Russia and NATO. For Russia, the harsh geography within the Cap of the North limits the scale of potential Russian ground operations in the territory; for NATO, austere conditions and limited infrastructure would make it difficult to counter any potential Russian incursions (see Figure 11). Dense forests, rocky terrain, and numerous lakes would complicate the advance of heavy equipment over a large front. Heavy snow in winter greatly inhibits the ability to travel by land. Furthermore, biting cold in winter affects not just operators, but also their gear, severely diminishing battery life, among other things. Rough topography, harsh weather, atmospheric disturbances, and relatively sparse satellite coverage make communication difficult as well. Summer offers little respite; warmer temperatures thaw the ice and snow turning the ground into impassable marshland.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Neretnieks, "Nato Och Den Nordisk/Baltiska Regionen."

²⁴⁰ Sune Engel Rasmussen, "How Arctic Soldiers Train for What They Fear Most: Warm Weather," Wall Street Journal, September 30, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/europe/how-arctic-soldiers-train-for-what-they-fear-most-warm-weather-9a56575b>

FIGURE 11: MILITARY AND TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE CAP OF THE NORTH

Created by CSBA using QGIS and naturalearthdata.com with basing information from Janes and <https://gfsis.org/ge/maps/russian-military-forces>. Blue dots represent potential airfields and ports that Russian forces may target to hinder NATO operations in the Cap of the North and surrounding waters. They also show the locations of major NATO units stationed in the region. Red dots illustrate Russian units and their supporting airfields and ports.

Operating in the Cap of the North thus requires forces that are specially trained and equipped to operate in such a hostile environment. Therefore, the most likely option for Russian forces would probably be to use highly mobile light or airborne forces to quickly seize airfields to stop NATO from using them to strike targets on the Kola Peninsula or in the Barents and Norwegian Seas.²⁴¹ They would also likely employ significant numbers of winterized unmanned systems for ISR and strike missions.²⁴²

NATO forces in the Cap of the North, therefore, must be maintained in high readiness to respond to any such Russian efforts. However, responding quickly to any Russian aggression will be difficult, considering the large area of the region, its sparse infrastructure, limited numbers of military units, and small populations. The combined area of Troms and Finnmark

241 Phillip Petersen, *The Northwestern TVD in Soviet Operational Strategic Planning*, 2014 report prepared for the DoD Office of Net Assessment. Though this report was made public in December 2014, it is no longer available on the DoD website. For a short description of the report, see “From Fiction to Fact: Could Russia Have Captured Iceland During the Cold War?”, *The National Interest*, December 10, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/fiction-fact-could-russia-have-captured-iceland-during-cold-war-197722>.

242 Federico Borsari and Gordon B. “Skip” Davis, Jr., *High Stakes in the High North: Harnessing Uncrewed Capabilities for Arctic Defense and Security*, (Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), December 16, 2025), <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/high-stakes-in-the-high-north-harnessing-uncrewed-capabilities-for-arctic-defense-and-security/>.

in Norway, Norrbotten and Swedish Lapland in Sweden, and Finnish Lapland is about 85 percent of the area of Germany—and almost double the size of the Baltic states.²⁴³ The large area coupled with the limited number of national and NATO units stationed in the Cap of the North provides potential opportunities for Russian units to flank or bypass defenses through ground maneuver or tactical air assaults.²⁴⁴ A sparse civilian population also means that local inhabitants cannot be mobilized quickly or en masse to repel an attack in the area.²⁴⁵ The FLF Finland is intended to become a surge capability, but NATO would likely need to pre-deploy additional forces to the region that have the capability to respond quickly to threats or attacks. A robust ISR network in the Cap of the North would also be required to provide these forces sufficient warning as to where and when Russian attacks might occur.

Of course, NATO's new presence in the High North also presents challenges to Russia, which will have to respond to any new NATO postures and capabilities in the region. NATO should be careful not to increase escalation concerns too drastically but it could still consider ways to compel Russia to devote more resources to the defense of Kola, thereby imposing costs on the Russian military and forcing it to divert some of its limited resources from other regions and capability areas.

Besides the Cap of the North, Russia might seek to seize islands in the Svalbard archipelago—particularly Spitsbergen, the largest and only permanently inhabited island—to reinforce its inner bastion defenses and/or help its submarines to break through NATO ASW barriers at the Bear Gap.²⁴⁶ Political and legal issues complicate Norwegian defense of Svalbard and make it a potential area for Russia to distract NATO forces and attention from other areas of the Northeast Quadrant. The 1920 Treaty of Svalbard essentially forbids Norway from maintaining a permanent military presence on the archipelago, and Russia has repeatedly worked to negatively shape perceptions of Norwegian sovereign control of Svalbard.²⁴⁷ The proximity of Russian forces exacerbates the issue. Nagurskoye air base on Russia's Frans Josef Land archipelago is just 260 km away and has recently been expanded and modernized to host fighters and tankers.²⁴⁸ In a crisis, Russian forces could deploy air

243 Neretnieks, "Nato Och Den Nordisk/Baltiska Regionen," 109.

244 Jan Henningsson, *Natomedlemskapets konsekvenser för markdomänen - Ett diskussionsunderlag inför fortsatt förmågeutveckling [The Consequences of NATO Membership for the Land Domain - A Basis for Discussion for Continued Capability Development]*, FOI Memo 8520 (Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2024).

245 Karlis Neretnieks, "Nato Och Den Nordisk/Baltiska Regionen."

246 Katarzyna Zysk, "Svalbard's Deterrence Gap," *Survival* 68, no. 1 (2026), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396338.2026.2620293>. Note that Spitsbergen is the only island in the Svalbard archipelago that has a few permanent settlements supporting a population of less than 3,000 people.

247 Elisabeth Braw, "We Need to Pay Closer Attention to Svalbard," *POLITICO*, March 26, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/we-need-to-pay-closer-attention-to-svalbard/>; Arild Moe and Anne-Kristin Jørgensen, "Russia's Policy of Presence in Svalbard," *Polar Record* 61 (January 2025): e11, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003224742500004X>; Zysk, "Svalbard's Deterrence Gap," 96–98.

248 Matthew Melino et al., *Ice Curtain: Hunting for Russia's Newest Military 'Treasures in the Far North'* (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2020), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ice-curtain-hunting-russias-newest-military-treasures-far-north>.

and maritime forces to attempt to deny NATO access to Svalbard and better control transit through the Bear Gap.

Should the Russian government decide to attack Spitsbergen or another island in the Svalbard archipelago, NATO would have two options: It could either prevent Russian forces from landing on and seizing the island in the first place or eject occupying Russian forces. The first option would be far easier than the second. Accordingly, NATO should emphasize denying Russian forces the ability to land on the island by sea or air. The Norwegian military should have a contingency plan to rapidly and preemptively emplace defensive military assets on the archipelago in the event of a crisis. This would require having equipment and forces prepositioned on the Norwegian mainland that could move rapidly to key locations on the island as soon as there are indications and warning of potential Russian efforts to seize it.²⁴⁹ A robust ISR structure for timely warning, quick reaction ground forces, and sufficient transport to land and support units on Svalbard would be essential for executing this option. Norway must also have the assets postured to deny Russian attempted landings with sufficient air defenses and anti-ship capabilities.

Rather than seizing an island in the archipelago, Russia could also choose to launch air and missile attacks on the islands to prevent any NATO forces arriving there from operating. NATO air and missile defenses provided either by surface vessels operating nearby, air assets that could quickly respond, or long-range strike from the Norwegian mainland that could target attacking Russian sea and/or air platforms launching attacks would be essential.

Defense Against Russian Maritime Threats from the High North

Concurrently with defense of NATO member state territory in the High North, NATO must defend the relevant SLOCs and work to control the sea areas surrounding the region. One of the canonical maritime threats during the Cold War was the possibility of Soviet submarines escaping into the North Atlantic to threaten NATO transatlantic SLOCs or member state coastlines.²⁵⁰ Controlling the waters between Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom (the “GIUK Gap”) was thus seen as crucial both for denying Soviet submarines access to Atlantic SLOCs and for enabling the alliance’s maritime operations on Russia’s northern flank.²⁵¹

249 This could involve, for example, having pre-packaged containers of supplies ready to transport.

250 Despite the concern of attacks on NATO transatlantic SLOCs based in part off the experience of the Battle of the Atlantic, it appears that the Soviet Union never had such a plan, instead adopting a more defense-oriented approach to the region through bastion defense. See, for example: Bradford Dismukes, “The Return of Great-Power Competition—Cold War Lessons about Strategic Antisubmarine Warfare and Defense of Sea Lines of Communication,” *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 3 (2020), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol73/iss3/6>. See also the debate from the Cold War, including: Breemer, “The Soviet Navy’s SSBN Bastions: Evidence, Inference, and Alternative Scenarios”; Walt, *Analysts in War and Peace*; Weinland et al, Admiral Gorshkov on “Navies in War and Peace.”

251 Childs, *Gauging the Gap*, 6–10; Shane Ward, “The GIUK Gap: A New Age of A2/AD in Contested Strategic Maritime Spaces,” *Next Generation Nuclear Network* (Center for Strategic & International Studies), September 2024), <https://nuclearnetwork.csis.org/the-giuk-gap-a-new-age-of-a2-ad-in-contested-strategic-maritime-spaces/>.

The GIUK Gap remains important today. But, given greatly reduced contemporary Russian naval forces compared with the Cold War era, Russian maritime forces would face significant risks while passing through the Gap. The Russian navy today has a relatively small number of submarines, a limited set of naval aviation assets, and a lack of long-range maritime ISR capabilities. So, instead of venturing into the North Atlantic, it is plausible that most of the Northern Fleet will probably remain within, or at least close to, its Barents Sea bastion to better protect its SSBNs and increase the survivability of other limited-quantity naval assets.²⁵² In this scenario, Russia would be unlikely to conduct a strategy of targeting NATO open ocean transatlantic shipping.

Although NATO logistics flows may face less of a threat in the open Atlantic Ocean than was the theoretical concern during the Cold War, Russian long-range land attack cruise missiles (LACM) launched from the Barents and Norwegian Seas can still disrupt NATO logistics at their destination ports in northern and western Europe.²⁵³ For example, *Yasen* and *Yasen-M*-class submarines armed with *Kalibr* cruise missiles could target European ports from as far away as 2,500 km (see Figure 12).²⁵⁴

FIGURE 12: RUSSIAN ABILITY TO TARGET EUROPE FROM HIGH NORTH WATERS

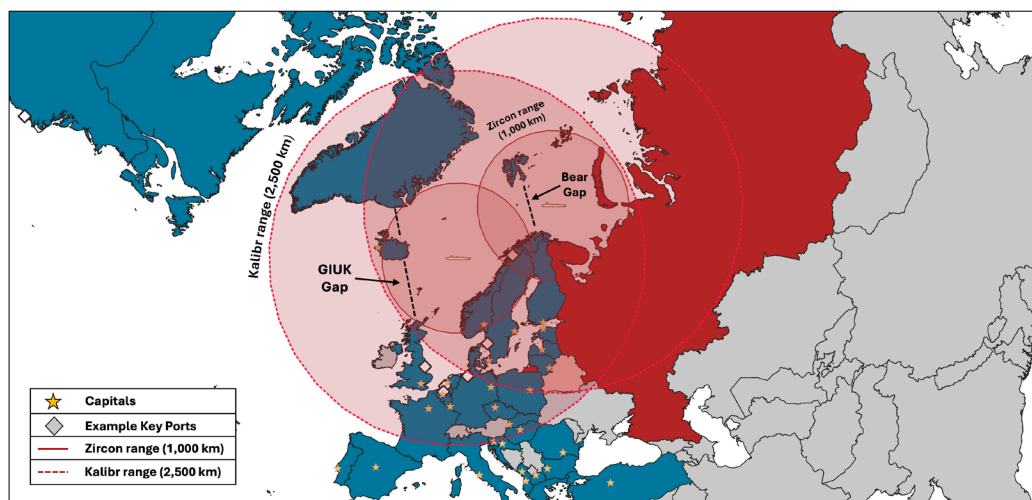


Image created by CSBA using QGIS and naturalearthdata.com. Inspired by an image from: Childs, *Gauging the Gap*, p.15.

To mitigate this threat, NATO forces should operate closer to the Russian bastion, and NATO naval forces should strive to contain Russian submarines behind the Bear Gap. Doing so could help reduce the volume of attacks on European ports critical for reinforcing the Baltics

²⁵² Ibid. There is an ongoing debate today about the importance of bastion defense for the Russians. See Kjellén, “The Russian Northern Fleet Bastion Revisited.”

²⁵³ Ibid, 14.

²⁵⁴ “3M-14 Kalibr (SS-N-30A),” Missile Threat (Center for Strategic and International Security, *Missile Defense Project*, 2024, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/ss-n-30a/>).

by keeping the bulk of Russian sea-launched LACM-armed platforms out of range. Thus, monitoring and tracking Russian SSN and SSGN movements in the waters from the GIUK Gap northwards to the Bear Gap and beyond remains a critical mission for NATO naval forces. Doing so requires employment of persistent, dispersed, capable ASW assets to track and—if ordered—destroy Northern Fleet submarines.

Active defense of NATO territory will also be required to reduce the risk posed by Russian LACMs. Scandinavian ports are especially vulnerable to attack from Russian LACMs, but ports along the North Sea and even the U.S. east coast could be under threat from submarine-launched LACMs. Russian missiles fired from the Barents Sea bastion can hit Narvik in northern Norway and potentially reach as far south as Gothenburg, Sweden. Russian submarines that break through Bear Gap and operate in the Norwegian Sea could strike the major ports of Rotterdam, Antwerp and Bremerhaven. Key ports in the United Kingdom could also be struck from Russian submarines operating in the Norwegian Sea. All those major ports are critical for the timely delivery of trans-Atlantic or intra-European reinforcements headed for the Cap of the North or to the Baltics and other eastern European destinations.²⁵⁵ Expanding ground-based air and missile defenses to protect key ports and other high-leverage logistics nodes on the European continent will be essential to NATO's ability to sustain operations throughout the entire Northeast Quadrant.

European ports need robust layered integrated air and missile defense to ensure NATO trans-Atlantic and intra-European SLOC terminal points remain open, but they currently largely lack them. Layered, distributed concepts could be based around rings, in which an outer ring detects and engages targets in the distance, an inner ring protects the immediate area, and a close-in ring provides point-defense.²⁵⁶ Ground-based missile defenses, such as Patriot or NASAMS, can be deployed near port facilities to defend against incoming cruise

²⁵⁵ Narvik is a critical port for moving equipment and personnel to the Cap of the North, as demonstrated by the transport of U.S. Marine Corps prepositioned equipment for Exercise Cold Response 26. Stephen Sewell, "Marines Forge New Role for Collective Arctic Defense During NATO Exercise," U.S. Department of Defense, March 23, 2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4440824/marines-forge-new-role-for-collective-arctic-defense-during-nato-exercise/>. Gothenburg is also a key port for receiving NATO equipment to supply operations in the Northeast Quadrant. Steven Wills, "The Baltic: A NATO Lake With Crocodiles," (Center for European Policy Analysis, December 1, 2025), <https://cepa.org/article/the-baltic-a-nato-lake-with-crocodiles/>. Rotterdam, Antwerp, and Bremerhaven are among the largest ports in Europe and regularly receive military equipment transported from the United States. Andy Bounds, "Europe's Biggest Port Readies for Potential War with Russia," *Financial Times*, July 8, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/0c42af06-2139-4848-a980-b90494794c98?syn-25a6b1a6=1>; Trevares Johnson, "Port Operations: 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division Combat Power Arrives in Europe," *US Army*, July 23, 2023, https://www.army.mil/article/268557/port_operations_2nd_armored_brigade_combat_team_1st_armored_division_combat_power_arrives_in_europe; Milena Wälde, "Belgium to Arm Antwerp Port with Anti-Aircraft Guns," *POLITICO*, February 26, 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/article/belgium-bart-de-wever-antwerp-port-anti-aircraft-guns/>.

²⁵⁶ Carl Rehberg and Herbert Kemp, *Strengthening the Phalanx: Layered, Comprehensive, and Distributed Air and Missile Defense in the Indo-Pacific* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2024).

missiles. However, air and missile defense of major seaports of debarkation still remains overly dependent on scarce U.S. defensive systems.²⁵⁷

Besides ASW efforts to defend from the GIUK Gap northwards, NATO should strive to have a more persistent naval presence in the Norwegian Sea and towards the Barents Sea. This does not necessarily mean large numbers of assets, given potential concerns about diverting too many ASW and other assets from other missions. NATO has already begun to increase its presence in the region, including through Multinational Standing NATO Maritime Group One (SNMG1) and Arctic Sentry, an effort launched in February 2026 to better coordinate existing allied operations and activities.²⁵⁸ But having more persistent presence could enable greater situational awareness and faster response in the event of crisis or conflict to surveil, track, and if necessary, engage Russian ships and submarines operating in the region. Furthermore, the presence would signal that NATO values the region and compel Russia to adjust to NATO's new operational patterns.

Roles and Investments

Recurrent exercises and a growing force presence in the region show that NATO has begun to develop responses to the Russian threat in the upper Northeast Quadrant. Fulfilling the above requirements, however, necessitates greater operational coherence.²⁵⁹ Developing comprehensive contingency plans for both defensive and offensive operations in the upper Northeast Quadrant is necessary for NATO member states to exploit their relative advantages against potential Russian aggression in the region. NATO member states both inside and outside the Northeast Quadrant must take on well-specified roles that suit their geography and military capabilities, even if it requires shifting focus away from other areas.

Formalizing a C2 structure for operations in the upper Northeast Quadrant would help ensure operations there are sustainable and operationally effective. A long history of North Atlantic and Arctic operations, paired with robust C2 experience, makes the UK military best suited to lead overall operations in the upper Northeast Quadrant. British commanders

257 Max Bergmann et al., *Europe Needs an ASAP Program for Air Defense* (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2026), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/europe-needs-asap-program-air-defense>.

258 "NATO in the Arctic," (Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies, February 26, 2026), <https://tedstevensarcticcenter.org/nato-in-the-arctic/>; Mathieu Boul  gue, "NATO Awakens in the High North," (Center for European Policy Analysis, March 19, 2026), <https://cepa.org/article/nato-awakens-in-the-high-north/>; Dzirhan Mahadzir, "NATO Launches Arctic Sentry in High North in Response to Russian Activity," *USNI News*, February 16, 2026, <https://news.usni.org/2026/02/16/nato-launches-arctic-sentry-in-high-north-in-response-to-russian-activity>; NATO Maritime Command, "NATO Strengthens Maritime Presence in the Arctic and High North," NATO, July 28, 2025, <https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2025/nato-strengthens-maritime-presence-in-the-arctic-and-high-north.aspx>; NATO, "Arctic Security," NATO, February 16, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/arctic-security>.

259 Anna Gustafson and Ryan Moreman, "Why NATO Needs to Re-Focus on the North Atlantic," *The National Interest*, March 3, 2026, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-nato-needs-to-re-focus-on-the-north-atlantic>; Palle Ydsteb  , "NATO, Doctrines, and the Arctic," in *Defending NATO's Northern Flank: Power Projection and Military Operations*, VitalBook file, ed. Lon Strauss and Njord Wegge, Contemporary Security Studies (Routledge, 2024).

will take control of JFC Norfolk in the near future and previously have led JEF maritime missions in the North, Norwegian, and Barents Seas.²⁶⁰ The UK's location at the intersection of the Atlantic Ocean and the upper Northeast Quadrant keeps it far enough away from the bulk of Russian threats yet proximate enough to the operating area to maintain high situational awareness of the operating environment throughout its expanse.

Beyond C2, the British military, along with its Norwegian counterparts, should assume responsibility for the bulk of the ASW operations in the Norwegian and Barents Seas. Both the Royal Navy and Royal Norwegian Navy have robust and interoperable advanced ASW capabilities. For example, in 2025, the British and Norwegian governments agreed to build a combined fleet of at least 13 British-built Type 26 ASW frigates, with eight operated by the Royal Navy and five by the Royal Norwegian Navy.²⁶¹ Royal Air Force and Royal Norwegian Air Force operate a combined fleet of 14 P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft. Norway operates an intelligence ship in the Barents Sea up to 280 days a year.²⁶² The relative capability and capacity of British and Norwegian ASW forces compared with other states in the upper Northeast Quadrant make them uniquely qualified to lead NATO operations to prevent Russian submarines from breaching the Bear or GIUK Gaps.

Germany could also contribute to British and Norwegian ASW efforts. Besides enabling the overland transportation of forces and equipment to NATO's eastern frontline states, Germany has signaled a growing interest and ambition to operate in the maritime spaces of the upper Northeast Quadrant.²⁶³ Berlin recently acquired the first aircraft in its planned P-8 fleet and has conducted North Atlantic ASW patrols from a base in the United Kingdom.²⁶⁴ In October 2025, Iceland agreed to allow Germany to station its new P-8s on the island to further improve NATO's ASW capabilities around the GIUK Gap.²⁶⁵ Germany and Norway have also increased maritime cooperation. For example, the two countries

260 "European Allies to take on new leadership roles in NATO's Command Structure," NATO, February 6, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2026/02/06/european-allies-to-take-on-new-leadership-roles-in-natos-command-structure>; Lee Willett, "UK-led JEF Task Force Conducts First Seabed Warfare Deployment," *Naval News*, March 1, 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/01/uk-led-jef-task-force-conducts-first-seabed-warfare-deployment/>.

261 "UK and Norway to operate together to counter Russian undersea threat through major new defence agreement," UK Government press release, December 4, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-norway-to-operate-together-to-counter-russian-undersea-threat-through-major-new-defence-agreement>.

262 Detsch, "NATO's New Map."

263 The German Federal Government (2024) 'Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines', September 2024, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2676060/5496910022404f7cf68049f1b10e4d5a/arkt-is-leitlinien-data.pdf>, 11; Childs, Gauging the Gap, 26.

264 Dzirhan Mahadzir, "German P-8 Aircraft Head to U.K. Air Base to Track Russian Subs," USNI, October 28, 2025, <https://news.usni.org/2025/10/28/german-p-8-aircraft-head-to-u-k-air-base-to-track-russian-subs>.

265 German Federal Ministry of Defence, "Pistorius in Reykjavik: Germany and Iceland deepen military cooperation," October 20, 2025, <https://www.bmvg.de/en/news/germany-iceland-planning-strengthen-military-cooperation-6057516>.

agreed to co-develop and procure a common anti-ship missile and a new class of submarines.²⁶⁶ Germany, although primarily focused on the Baltic Sea, can still provide substantial support to ASW efforts around the maritime chokepoints of the upper Northeast Quadrant.

Denmark could contribute to NATO efforts in the maritime upper Northeast Quadrant, though competing priorities may stretch Danish military capabilities thin. Control of Greenland and the Faroe Islands make Denmark a relevant actor around the GIUK Gap, and Copenhagen has announced plans for an increased military presence in the Arctic. In 2025, Denmark invested nearly 14 billion kroner (\$2B USD) in Arctic security efforts, including plans for additional Arctic patrol vessels, icebreakers, P-8s, and new air surveillance radars.²⁶⁷ Yet control of the Danish Straits is also critical for NATO operations in the Baltic region. Thus, the focus on Greenland must not distract Denmark from the Baltic. Barring a major increase in military spending, the Danish military could find itself over-stretched if it tried to operate in multiple areas of the Northeast Quadrant simultaneously. To free up Danish resources for Baltic-centric operations, other allies—such as Norway, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States—could take on more of the defense burden in Greenland, while recognizing Danish sovereignty over its Arctic holdings.

Belgium and the Netherlands should play an expanded role in protecting their major ports. The Royal Netherlands Navy has four *De Zeven Provinciën*-class air defense frigates, which have demonstrated the ability to track ballistic missiles and pass targeting information to a U.S. Navy destroyer for interception.²⁶⁸ Acquiring SM-3 interceptors of its own could allow the Royal Netherlands Navy to conduct ballistic missile defense interceptions without the need to rely on U.S. forces. In addition to advanced air and missile defense at sea, the Netherlands has also announced plans to improve its land-based defenses by expanding its Patriot missile force.²⁶⁹ To the south, Belgium lacks ground-based air defenses, though it plans to purchase NASAMS units to defend critical infrastructure, including the port of Antwerp.²⁷⁰ For higher-level threats Brussels must accelerate investment in longer-range

266 Bjørn Olav Knutsen, 'German–Norwegian Relations in Security and Defence: What Kind of Partnership?', *European View*, vol. 20, no. 1, April 2021, 88–96, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/17816858211001228>; Ålander, Minna, *Towards a New NATO* (Frivärld, 2026), <https://frivarld.se/rapporter/towards-a-new-nato/>.

267 John Hill, "Denmark grows military presence in Greenland with little Nato help," *Naval Technology*, January 15, 2026, <https://www.naval-technology.com/features/denmark-grows-military-presence-in-greenland-with-little-nato-help/?cf-view>.

268 "U.S., Dutch Navy Chiefs meet, discuss maritime security, reaffirm continued cooperation," June 17, 2021, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Press-Releases/display-pressreleases/Article/2662727/us-dutch-navy-chiefs-meet-discuss-maritime-security-reaffirm-continued-cooperat/>.

269 Rudy Ruitenberg, "Netherlands plans \$1.1 billion rush order for extra Patriot system," *Defense News*, March 24, 2026, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/03/24/netherlands-plans-11-billion-rush-order-for-extra-patriot-system/>.

270 Rudy Ruitenberg, "Belgium to add F-35s, spend billions on anti-air in defense catch-up," *Defense News*, July 21, 2025, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/07/21/belgium-to-add-f-35s-spend-billions-on-anti-air-in-defense-catch-up/>; Wälde, "Belgium to Arm Antwerp Port with Anti-Aircraft Guns."

air defenses of its own, such as the French-Italian SAMP/T, and/or deepen integration with Dutch Patriot systems to further improve air defenses over major European ports.

The danger that Russian submarines could pose to the U.S. east coast suggests that the upper Northeast Quadrant will remain a critical concern for Washington.²⁷¹ Defending the GIUK Gap in particular will be an area of increased U.S. interest. Notably, the Trump administration has called for acquiring the Danish territory of Greenland to improve U.S. homeland defense.²⁷² With its strategic location amidst the rise of Russian aggression, considerable new investment will be required for expanded military infrastructure on the island. Given Denmark's small size, as referenced above, NATO as a whole will need to help provide the necessary resources.

Across the gap in Iceland, the U.S. Navy has P-8s based in Keflavik, and a U.S. SSN visited an Icelandic port for the first time in 2025.²⁷³ Operations may not be limited to the GIUK Gap, however. Further north, U.S. surface ships entered the Barents Sea in 2020 for the first time since the 1980s, indicating the potential for future U.S. naval operations close to Russia's bastion defenses.²⁷⁴ The U.S. Marine Corps, which still stores prepositioned equipment in Norway and has a relationship with the country dating to the Cold War, could also play a role in the upper Northeast Quadrant.²⁷⁵ U.S. interest in the upper Northeast Quadrant will probably remain high if only for homeland defense reasons, even if U.S. force presence were to be reduced elsewhere in Europe.

In addition to existing capabilities, Northeast Quadrant and other NATO members should invest in greater maritime capabilities to help defend the region. For example, a greater number of ASW assets are likely needed in the region, and the maritime space could also benefit from greater use of unmanned systems.²⁷⁶ Harsh operating conditions and scarce basing options could make the use of unmanned surface vehicles (USV) and UUV more complicated, possibly leading, at least in the short-term, to an emphasis on UAS over surface

271 Alexis G. Grynkeiwich, "Statement by General Alexis G. Grynkeiwich, United States Air Force United States European Command Before the United States Armed Services Committee," Record Version, Posture Hearing, United States Senate Armed Services Committee, March 12, 2026, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/to-receive-testimony-on-the-posture-of-united-states-european-command-and-united-states-transportation-command-in-review-of-the-defense-authorization-request-for-fiscal-year-2027-and-the-future-years-defense-program>.

272 Sarah Garding, "Greenland, Denmark, and U.S. Relations," *Congressional Research Service*, January 22, 2026, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN12643>.

273 "Adm. Stuart B. Munsch Visits Keflavik Air Base, Reaffirms U.S. Commitment to Arctic Security and Strong Alliance with Iceland," *U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa*, July 10, 2025, <https://www.c6f.navy.mil/Press-Room/News/Article/4241226/adm-stuart-b-munsch-visits-keflavik-air-base-reaffirms-us-commitment-to-arctic-s/>.

274 Lauren Spaziano, 'U.S., U.K. Ships Operate in the Barents Sea', United States European Command, May 4, 2020, <https://www.eucom.mil/article/40251/us-uk-ships-operate-in-the-barents-sea>.

275 The Marine Corps Prepositioning Program-Norway (MCPN) continues to store equipment for a Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) in central Norway and is actively used for NATO exercises.

276 On unmanned systems in the Arctic, see: Federico Borsari and Gordon B. "Skip" Davis, Jr., *High Stakes in the High North: Harnessing Uncrewed Capabilities for Arctic Defense and Security* (Center for European Policy Analysis, 2025).

and undersea vehicles. Maritime-optimized long-endurance UAS could help provide persistent coverage of the region. The MQ-9B SeaGuardian [sic], for example, has a proven ability to operate in cold weather and can fly for up to forty hours.²⁷⁷ That being said, USVs and UUVs could potentially be integrated into SNMG1 to conduct undersea infrastructure protection and surface and subsurface surveillance tasks similar to those that have been used in *Operation Baltic Sentry*.²⁷⁸ Although more NATO navies plan to field unmanned surface and undersea vessels, member states and the alliance must produce a coherent plan for how to employ these new systems, ensuring operational concepts are clear and interoperability is high.²⁷⁹ NATO should improve its network of undersea sensors, perhaps leaning on the United Kingdom to coordinate monitoring. NATO could also benefit from more ice-strengthened warships, particularly as larger areas of the Arctic remain relatively passable, i.e., not blocked by pack ice, for longer periods during the year.

On land, experience in Arctic operations and a growing presence in the region mean that the United Kingdom and Norway could also take the lead in countering possible Russian ground incursions in the Cap of the North. In 2023, the British military opened “Camp Viking” in northern Norway to serve as a hub for British special operations units in the Arctic until at least 2033.²⁸⁰ Norway plans to have a full brigade deployed near the Russian border in Finnmark by 2032.²⁸¹ Both the British and Norwegian units in the Cap of the North have the training, equipment, and experience necessary to operate in demanding Arctic conditions. Expanding British and Norwegian presence in the Cap of the North even further could free up Swedish and Finnish forces to focus on operations further south in the Baltic sea region and along the Russo-Finnish border.

Forces in the Cap of the North could also benefit from increased connectivity, which entails more integrated command and control, additional transport infrastructure, and accruing greater experience in combined planning and operations. In the 2024 *Nordic Response* exercise, a Swedish brigade was led by an integrated Finnish-Swedish division staff. This division then attacked northward while a Norwegian-German division advanced south,

277 Jamie Hunter, “Securing The High North: MQ-9B SeaGuardian’s Role in Arctic Security,” *The War Zone*, February 11, 2026, <https://www.twz.com/sponsored-content/securing-the-high-north-mq-9b-seaguardians-role-in-arctic-security>.

278 Naval News staff, “NATO ACT deploys unmanned vehicles for surveillance in the Baltic Sea,” *Naval News*, August 7, 2025, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/07/nato-act-deploys-unmanned-vehicles-for-surveillance-in-the-baltic-sea/#:~:text=Naval%20News%20comment%20connection%20with%20warning%20systems.%E2%80%9D>.

279 Borsari and Davis, *High Stakes*; Childs, *Gauging the Gap*, 32; Aaron Marchant, “Ships or Munitions? Clarifying the Discussion on Unmanned Surface Vessels,” *War on the Rocks*, January 21, 2026, <https://warontherocks.com/2026/01/ships-or-munitions-clarifying-the-discussion-on-unmanned-surface-vessels/>.

280 “New Arctic operations base for UK commandos,” *Royal Navy News*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news/2023/march/08/230308-campvikingnorway>.

281 Thomas Nilson, “Norway steps up high north defense with fully equipped brigade in Finnmark,” *The Barents Observer*, April 5, 2024, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/norway-steps-up-high-north-defense-with-fully-equipped-brigade-in-finnmark/166478>.

creating a pincer maneuver.²⁸² Nordic Response 2024 demonstrated the possibility of an alliance maneuver led by a multi-national C2 structure in the Cap of the North. Formalizing such a structure could help NATO forces better organize against Russian threats in the upper Northeast Quadrant without creating the type of exploitable C2 seams seen in other parts of NATO's command structure.

Norway, Sweden, and Finland could also consider formalizing new initiatives such as multi-national units. As early as 2024, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland were exploring integrating units at different levels of operational and tactical command.²⁸³ There is an argument for a Nordic army corps or division headquarters tasked with combining the land forces and rebuilding competence above the brigade level.²⁸⁴ Håkan Edström, formerly a researcher at the Swedish Defense University, has proposed integrating significant parts of the Nordic armies, including creating multinational army divisions.²⁸⁵ The head of the Swedish Army's Operational Planning Section has suggested creating a joint Nordic corps under Swedish command to secure the Northern Flank.²⁸⁶ Doing so would allow for a larger, more unified response and take advantage of existing cooperation.

Sweden is already likely to be heavily involved in the defense of Finland's north, given its role as framework nation of the NATO FLF battlegroup in Finland, located at Rovaniemi on the Arctic Circle.²⁸⁷ This FLF will focus on the Arctic and Finland's north, and it could be dual-hatted as both a NATO command and a "minilateral" force outside of the direct NATO bureaucracy.²⁸⁸ Swedish (and Norwegian) leadership in the north of Finland could allow Finnish national forces to focus on the southern two-thirds of the country, where the bulk of the population and the greatest direct threat from Russia lies.²⁸⁹ The argument for the usefulness of such a minilateral force is that it could respond to Russian actions far faster than NATO could do under circumstances when speed of reaction would be critical.

282 Moregård, *Nordic Response 2024*.

283 Detsch, "NATO's New Map."

284 Karsten Friis and Rolf Tamnes, "The Defence of Northern Europe: New Opportunities, Significant Challenges," *International Affairs*, February 12, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae019>; John R. Deni, "Sweden and Finland Are on Their Way to NATO Membership. Here's What Needs to Happen Next.," (Atlantic Council, August 22, 2022), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/finland-and-sweden-in-nato-looking-beyond-madrid/>.

285 Håkan Edström, "Ett Offensivt Nordiskt Fokus För Armén? [An Offensive Nordic Focus for the Army?]," *Kungl Krigsvetenskapsakademiens Handlingar Och Tidskrift 2025*, no. 3 (2025). See also: Håkan Edström and Jan Ångström, "Trovärdig Avskräckning Genom Nordiskt Markoperativ Integration? [Credible Deterrence through Nordic Ground Operational Integration?]," *Kungl Krigsvetenskapsakademiens Handlingar Och Tidskrift 2024*, no. 4 (2024).

286 Mathias Wallin, "The Swedish Army: The Key to Nordic Defense," (The Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences, September 26, 2025), <https://en.kkrva.se/den-svenska-armen-nyckeln-i-det-nordiska-forsvaret/>.

287 "NATO Land Forces Staff to Be Based in Rovaniemi," *Helsinki Times*, February 16, 2026, <https://www.helsinkitimes.fi/finland/finland-news/domestic/28527-nato-land-forces-staff-to-be-based-in-rovaniemi.html>.

288 David Auerswald, "A New Arctic Strategy for Sweden," (Atlantic Council, February 4, 2026), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/a-new-arctic-strategy-for-sweden/>; Szymański and Tarociński, "NATO's Northern Flank."

289 Neretnieks, "Nato Och Den Nordisk/Baltiska Regionen."

Infrastructure in the Cap of the North must also improve, with particular need to strengthen lines of communication running west to east.²⁹⁰ For example, Sweden and Finland currently use different rail gauges, forcing trains moving from Sweden to switch gauge using specialized bogie transfer devices in Haparanda before moving across the border.²⁹¹ A single-track rail line connects Narvik, Norway and Boden, Sweden. A disruption of the railway could hamper logistics and reinforcement efforts in the upper Northeast Quadrant, as was demonstrated when the line was closed for repairs in late 2023 and early 2024, forcing allies attending a major exercise in Norway to reroute their logistics flows for that exercise.²⁹² Improving logistics lines by adding redundancies and eliminating inefficiencies are important for enabling NATO forces to rapidly reinforce the upper Northeast Quadrant against Russian aggression without unnecessary delays or disruptions.

Improved situational awareness in the Cap of the North is also critical to ensure responsiveness of NATO forces to possible Russian aggression. The persistent and broad ISR coverage enabled by unmanned systems could make them especially useful for monitoring Russian forces in the upper Northeast Quadrant and engaging in deterrence by detection.²⁹³ For example, MQ-4s and MQ-9s have an endurance of more than 24 hours, which would allow them to track targets for a longer period than manned aircraft.²⁹⁴ The British military plans to field 16 MQ-9B UAS and has explored a short take-off and landing version for carrier operations.²⁹⁵ Oslo wants to procure a UAS fleet for Arctic and maritime surveillance as well.²⁹⁶ The NATO ISR Force (NISRF) is currently an underutilized tool in the upper Northeast Quadrant. An expansion of the NISRF to include additional unmanned aerial systems and establishing a base at Andøya Air Station (Norway) and Satakunta Air Base (Finland) could greatly improve ISR coverage in terms of area coverage and persistence in

290 Moregård, *Nordic Response 2024*, 4.

291 A passenger link in Haparanda is scheduled to open this summer, requiring passengers to transfer trains. Railway Pro, "Finland and Sweden will once again be connected by train," *Railway Pro*, April 17, 2026, <https://www.railwaypro.com/wp/finland-and-sweden-will-once-again-be-connected-by-train/>.

292 Hilde-Gunn Bye, "Nordic response exercise logistics impacted as Ofoten railway line remains closed," *Arctic Today*, February 16, 2024, <https://www.arctictoday.com/nordic-response-exercise-logistics-impacted-as-ofoten-railway-line-remains-closed/>; Moregård, *Nordic Response 2024*.

293 Thomas G. Mahnken et al., *Deterrence by Detection: A Key Role for Unmanned Aircraft Systems in Great Power Competition* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2020).

294 General Atomics Aeronautical, "MQ-9B SkyGuardian," General Atomics, <https://www.ga-asi.com/remotely-piloted-aircraft/mq-9b-skyguardian>; Northrop Grumman, "MQ-4C Triton," Northrop Grumman, <https://www.northropgrumman.com/what-we-do/aircraft/triton>.

295 "Royal Navy's successful crewless aircraft trials offer 'glimpse into the future' of carrier operations," *Royal Navy News*, November 17, 2023, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news/2023/november/17/20231117-royal-navys-successful-crewless-aircraft-trials-offer-glimpse-into-the-future>.

296 Elisabeth Gosselin-Malo, "US vendors tussle over Norway's maritime-surveillance drone business," *Defense News*, July 1, 2025, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/07/01/us-vendors-tussle-over-norways-maritime-surveillance-drone-business/>.

the upper Northeast Quadrant.²⁹⁷ Nations and NATO would need to work to ensure interoperability between the NSIRF and national forces.

Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO has shifted the alliance's center of gravity both geographically and operationally—and ultimately strategically—towards the northeastern region of Europe. Their accession has also created new challenges and opportunities for the alliance in the region. Adopting the suggestions provided in this chapter could improve NATO's ability to deter and defend in the European High North while concurrently improving its position in the rest of the Northeast Quadrant, since the Baltic and the Arctic are so intrinsically connected. Conceptualizing the Northeast Quadrant as a unitary coherent area of operations—and making requisite investments and plans to defend the newly conceptualized region—recognizes the vital interconnections between what happens in the Baltic Sea littoral region along NATO's border with Russia and the upper regions of the quadrant in the High North and Norwegian Seas should Russia choose to initiate war with NATO.

297 Travis Sharp and Ryan Kaufman, *Diamond in the Rough: The Past, Present, and Future of NATO's ISR Force* (Washington, DC: CSBA), March 18, 2026.

CHAPTER 5

The Value of Regionally-Focused Approaches

When Sweden and Finland joined NATO, there was some concern that their Nordic identities and existing focus on their immediate region could lead to blocs and thus disunity within the alliance.²⁹⁸ This report argues instead that Sweden and Finland *should* focus on their immediate region—the Northeast Quadrant—alongside their neighbors. Treating the region as a unified area of operations and tailoring regional capabilities to the Northeast Quadrant’s threats and geography will strengthen NATO’s ability to deter and defend, both within the region and more broadly.

The primary critique of such an approach is that the putative military operational gain would not outweigh added political friction among member states. Concerns about the political unity of NATO are understandable. After all, a defense planning approach that explicitly divides the alliance into different geographies could conflict with the fundamental premise that “an attack on one is an attack on all,” and the expectation that all member states will contribute to any collective defense actions.

However, the military benefits of regional planning and specialization are likely to be significant, particularly given continuing threats from Russia and continuing uncertainty about the U.S. role in the alliance. Furthermore, the concerns raised by critics of a regional division of labor may be overstated. For example, a regional planning focus does not preclude the members of one region from supporting operations elsewhere.

²⁹⁸ See, for example: Zachary Selden, “Will Finland and Sweden Joining NATO Deepen the Alliance’s Problems?,” *War on the Rocks*, May 31, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/will-finland-and-sweden-joining-nato-deepen-the-alliances-problems/>. This piece argues the Nordics will not become a bloc: Henrik Ø. Breitenbach et al., *Options for Enhancing Nordic–Baltic Defence and Security Cooperation: An Explorative Survey* (Centre for Military Studies, 2017).

Unity as an Organizing Principle

Unity is important to the alliance for three primary reasons. First, it is core to NATO's central deterrent message that an attack on one member is an attack on all, and therefore that an aggressor will face the combined might of the alliance. If NATO members are divided on an geographic basis, adversaries might doubt that pledge, supposing that a member in one region might not defend a member in another. Second, unity is core to NATO's defense since many NATO members make decisions about their own national defense plans and investments based on the assumption that alliance members will come to their aid if they are attacked. Otherwise, if fellow alliance members did not support them, a given state would be weaker relative to an opponent than it otherwise might have been. Third, unity underpins political commitments to the alliance insofar as consensus-based decision-making guarantees that each member state, regardless of size, has a voice.²⁹⁹

However, the emphasis on unity also presents geospatial and temporal challenges. First, it treats all NATO members and sub-regions as having similar defense problems and solutions. That, in turn, can lead individual member states and the alliance as a whole to overemphasize capabilities that can be employed across the alliance rather than those that are optimized for a specific region. In the 1990s and 2000s, for example, as NATO members adopted a more globally-oriented threat perspective, alliance defense planning and capability development focused on systems that could be employed out-of-area, even if they were less suited for contingencies in NATO's area of responsibility.³⁰⁰ After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and especially after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO members began to realize that many of those investments were not very useful—and even suboptimal—against a determined continental threat like Russia. But gaining agreement on new investment priorities was challenging given that alliance territory extends across very different geographies and that member states face differing threats from the Mediterranean to the eastern front and the High North.

Unity also presents a temporal challenge in that consensus-building does not happen quickly, which means that mobilization, force development, and force deployments often happen slowly. In numerous wargames assessing a potential Russian invasion of the Baltics, for example, NATO often takes weeks or months to be ready for military action, due largely

299 Consensus decision-making within the alliance is not strictly a requirement, but it is certainly a norm that has developed to ensure that no state is being forced by other members to do something. Joel Linnainmäki, "An Alliance of Strategic Divergences: Contextualizing Northern Europe and Finland in NATO Decision-Making," in *NATO's New Northern Direction: The Evolving Role of the Alliance in Europe's North*, by Joel Linnainmäki et al., Finnish Foreign Policy Paper 11 (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2024), 19.

300 Alexander Mattelaer, "Rediscovering Geography in NATO Defence Planning," *Defence Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018): 340, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2018.1497446>.

to disputes between member states.³⁰¹ NATO adversaries, especially Russia, know this and seek to weaken NATO by exacerbating member state disunity.

The Benefits of a Regionally-Focused Approach

These geographic and temporal challenges could be mitigated by embracing some measure of regionally-focused specialization—that is, optimizing the defense of especially vulnerable regions by allowing local NATO member states to put greater (although not exclusive) emphasis on defense of their region in terms of force posture and acquisition priorities.³⁰² There are a number of advantages to such an approach.

A regional focus, particularly in high-threat areas, allows NATO to tailor its defenses to each geographic region rather than trying to implement a one-size-fits-all approach. The geographies within NATO's AOR vary widely, from the Arctic and sub-arctic conditions of the European High North to the plains of Central Europe, the mountainous Alps, and the shores of the Mediterranean. Each region also faces different types of threats and different threat actors. For example, Mediterranean countries have traditionally been much more concerned about threats coming from the Middle East and North Africa, while northern NATO members have prioritized Russia. Even the nature of the Russia threat varies across the alliance; Russian military options in the Black Sea, for example, are not the same as those in the Baltic states or Poland. The regional family of defense plans approved at the 2023 Vilnius Summit, with their focus on three different regions, presumably acknowledge these differences.³⁰³

To implement these plans, NATO should not only tailor defense strategies for each region, but it should also encourage nations located in those regions (or that have specific military responsibilities in those regions) to specialize the bulk of their forces for the implementation and execution of those specific plans (regional, functional, and domain-specific). This would

301 NATO did act very rapidly politically, economically, and financially against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. There were also significant military measures. For example, NATO allies placed thousands of troops at high readiness as part of the NATO Response Force and increased the size of the eFP forces in the Baltic states and Poland, in addition to quickly establishing a presence in the Black Sea region. See: Paul Belkin, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: NATO's Response," Congressional Research Service, March 21, 2022. See also: Monaghan et al., *Understanding NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area*, 3.

302 This is similar to concepts like nodal defense and hub-and-spoke. On nodal defense in the NATO context, see: Lotje Boswinkel et al., "Alliance Networking in Europe and the Indo-Pacific," *War on the Rocks*, December 17, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/12/alliance-networking-in-europe-and-the-indo-pacific/>; Luis Simón et al., "Nodal Defence: The Changing Structure of U.S. Alliance Systems in Europe and East Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 3 (2021): 360–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1636372>; Iro Särkkä, "Nodal Defense and the Power of the Minilaterals in the Baltic Sea Region," in *Deterrence and Defense in the Baltic Sea Region Against the Russian Threat*, ed. Fritz Rademacher and Andrzej Lis (Publishing Office of Doctrine and Training Centre of the Polish Armed Forces, 2026). On hub-and-spoke, see: Mattelaer, "Rediscovering Geography in NATO Defence Planning."

303 The three regions are, respectively, the High North and Atlantic, known as Joint Operations Area-Northwest (JOA-NW), commanded from Joint Force Command (JFC) Norfolk, Virginia; the central region, known as Joint Operations Area-Centre (JOA-C), commanded from JFC Brunssum; and the southeast, known as Joint Operations Area-Southeast (JOA-SE), commanded from JFC Naples.

allow smaller nations to more efficiently allocate their resources towards the immediate defense of their region. NATO, through the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), could provide guidance on how members of each region should invest such that the entire force is interoperable and effective, rather than treating national militaries as more individual entities. Such an approach would also take advantage of existing tendencies for countries to prioritize those capabilities that will best defend the most proximate and acute threats they face.

Regionally-focused planning would also allow countries closer to a threat to react to aggression more quickly.³⁰⁴ This is happening already on an informal basis. “Minilateral” groupings comprising member states in a given region, such as the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the Northern Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) group, have already emerged within NATO to address the challenge of lengthy alliance decision-making and operational timeliness, as well as to explore other efforts such as expediting and coordinating acquisition.³⁰⁵ These groups all seek to accelerate negotiations and consensus-building among their participating members, but could also serve to highlight members’ specialized capabilities and, in specific instances, could serve as a quasi-quick reaction force to conduct limited missions.

NATO should continue to take advantage of these groups. They can operate under the NATO flag—or what the NATO-commissioned *NATO 2030* report that informed its 2022 Strategic Concept for the Alliance calls the “NATO chapeau”—and use NATO military structures and decision-making processes.³⁰⁶ If a crisis were to occur in a region, such regional groupings potentially could respond in coordination with the SACEUR and then submit further actions to the North Atlantic Council (NAC) to achieve consensus and spur alliance-wide action. If consensus were not reached then the member states in such groupings could continue to act on their own volition, i.e., as a “coalition of the willing.” Given NATO’s frequent inability to

304 NATO has taken other actions to increase its responsiveness, including giving SACEUR more authorities to act during times of crisis. Peter Rough and Christopher G. Cavoli, “The Military Scene-Setter with SACEUR Christopher G. Cavoli,” NATO Public Forum, Washington, D.C., July 10, 2024, <https://www.hudson.org/defense-strategy/nato-public-forum-military-scene-setter-christopher-cavoli-peter-rough>.

305 Neil Melvin, “Europe’s Minilateral Moment,” (Royal United Services Institute, December 16, 2025), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/europes-minilateral-moment>; Luigi Scazzieri, “The power of the few: How clusters can strengthen European defence,” *European Union Institute for Security Studies* (EUISS), February 20, 2026, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/power-few-how-clusters-can-strengthen-european-defence>; Yuliia Kurnyshova & Andrey Makarychev (2025), “Regionalism at a distance? War and minilateralism at Europe’s eastern flank,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 79(6), 988–1008, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2025.2556896>. On the future of the JEF, see Dan Baer and Sophie Besch, “NATO’s Northeast Countries Have a Template for Europe’s New Security Reality,” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 12, 2024), <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/12/jef-nato-northeast-europe-security>; Ian Bond, “The Joint Expeditionary Force: Deterrent, Defender, or Distraction?,” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 6, 2024), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/12/the-joint-expeditionary-force-deterrent-defender-or-distraction?lang=en>.

306 Thomas de Maiziere and A. Wess Mitchell, *NATO 2030: United for a New Era* (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2030), 61, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf. Coordination will be required among the minilaterals or regions. See: Melvin, “Europe’s Minilateral Moment.”

arrive at rapid, unanimous decisions, their faster reaction times could help disabuse Russia of any belief that it can exploit NATO's lack of responsiveness.

Regionally-focused planning does, of course, raise concerns. After all, the importance of unity for alliance-wide deterrence and defense has not disappeared. However, these concerns are easily exaggerated.³⁰⁷ First, strengthening NATO's most vulnerable regions (for example, the Northeast Quadrant), makes the alliance stronger because it would reduce the chances of war with Russia in the first place. By implementing a concept that buttresses the defense of especially vulnerable states like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, alliance members will still be able to dedicate adequate resources to other challenges. Particularly as its member states increase their defense budgets, NATO should be focused not just on spending more money but spending that money effectively and efficiently to enhance its collective combat power.³⁰⁸ Regionally-focused planning in the Northeast Quadrant and the specialization this entails would allow NATO members to more effectively spend their money and best exploit the new and significant geographic and capability advantages that the accession of Sweden and Finland have brought to the alliance.

Second, just because states focus on defending their own region does not mean that they cannot or will not intervene in other regions. For example, some subset of a nation's capabilities—such as airborne platforms, special operations forces, and space-based assets—remain fungible, mobile, or otherwise able to operate in multiple regions. These could be employed to support other NATO missions. The NATO Defence Planning Process can build in some degree of fungibility into its requirement development process, and NATO could work with member states to identify which of their capabilities could be made available in contingencies outside of their immediate region. Political discussions could continue to emphasize the role of unity, and exercises could routinely practice deploying capabilities from one region of the alliance to another.

Adopting an increased focus on such planning would actually be a return to NATO's roots. The absence of regionally-focused NATO planning is a relatively recent phenomenon, beginning in the post-Cold War era.³⁰⁹ Indeed, NATO's first Strategic Concept in 1949 stated, "[E]ach nation should undertake the task, or tasks, for which it is best suited. Certain nations, because of their geographic location or because of their capabilities, will appropriate specific missions."³¹⁰ Geography should play a central role in defense planning, allowing planners to take advantage of the strengths of member states in each region. For example, countries in the Northeast Quadrant almost inevitably would be the 'first responders' in any

307 This section draws from earlier arguments made in Dahlstrand, "Achieving the Promise of NATO's New Northeast Quadrant."

308 Travis Sharp, *Putting It All Together: The 2025 Defense Budget Request, Alternative Budget Proposals, and NATO Spending* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2025).

309 Mattelaer, "Rediscovering Geography in NATO Defence Planning."

310 As cited in Mattelaer, "Rediscovering Geography in NATO Defence Planning," 342.

Russian attack along NATO's vulnerable northeastern and northern borders. Their capabilities should match this reality. Planning around geography makes defense stronger, not weaker. The Northeast Quadrant framework provides an example of how NATO could embrace regionally- or geography-based planning to improve the alliance's ability to deter and defend.

CHAPTER 6

The Case for the Northeast Quadrant

This chapter summarizes the main arguments supporting the case for NATO to adopt a Northeast Quadrant framework for conceptualizing and enhancing deterrence and defense in northern and northeastern Europe.

Treating the Quadrant as a single coherent unified area of operations, enabled and underpinned by the accession of Sweden and Finland into NATO, would help NATO mitigate the most dangerous military operational threats posed to the alliance by an aggressive Russia, especially in the Baltic region. It would enhance the alliance's overall ability to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russian armed attacks on the most vulnerable member states located along NATO's borders with Russia and in its High North. Furthermore, the Quadrant concept would enable NATO to take maximal advantage of Swedish and Finnish geography, as well as the advanced military capabilities the two countries bring with them.

The mere conceptualization of the Northeast Quadrant will not by itself strengthen deterrence and defense in the region. As this report has reviewed, there are two main defense tasks facing the region: defending the Quadrant's border with Russia and securing the High North. Chapter 3 argued for defending the Northeast Quadrant's border with Russia by moving away from deterrence by attrition and reinforcement towards a limited but viable frontline defense combined with deterrence by interdiction. The frontline states would focus on increasing their lethality, and other states would support logistics and sustainment, as well as provide long-range strike for interdiction. Chapter 4 described ways to improve the defense of the Cap of the North and Svalbard and argued that NATO needs to operate further north in Arctic waters to mitigate the Russian maritime threat. However, there are broader planning considerations and related investments that must also be incorporated to

realize the full defensive potential of the region, with both bottom-up and top-down work to be done.³¹¹

Operationally, a focused regional approach entails optimizing NATO resources and plans best suited for deployment and employment within the Quadrant. Inherently, many if not most of these will be supplied by the states located within the Quadrant, given the suitability of their forces to operate in home terrain, their familiarity with the operating environment, and the political reality that national defense needs will generally prevail over alliance requirements when the two conflict in crisis or war.

Organizationally, as discussed in earlier chapters, Quadrant geography coupled with emerging trends in modern warfare make unity of command absolutely essential. Conversely, organizational C2 seams may be especially deleterious in generating excessive “Clausewitzian” friction and imposing severe temporal, geospatial, and other penalties on operational decisions and actions.

Lastly, the Northeast Quadrant concept, coupled with new Swedish and Finnish membership in NATO, has strong potential to contribute to European NATO members being able to assume ever greater responsibilities for the alliance defense of Europe. This is already an ongoing process, but it is as yet nascent. It may be of especial interest given the uncertainty some alliance leaders have expressed regarding the future role and/or contributions of the United States to NATO.

Realizing the Quadrant’s Full Potential

To realize the Quadrant’s full potential as a single coherent unified area of operations, several key matters need to be addressed. These include minimizing command and control seams, developing regionally-focused investments and planning, recognizing the value of NATO members outside the region, and helping shape the strategic environment. As the alliance’s newest members, Sweden and Finland both should also take additional steps to maximize their contributions to NATO.

Command and Control Seams

The command-and-control arrangements and the NATO organization of the Northeast Quadrant region need to be reexamined.³¹² The current JFC boundaries, as described in Chapter 2, are problematic because they cut directly through the Baltic Sea, thereby splitting the Baltics and Poland from the Nordic states. This runs contrary to the argument this

311 Karten Friis and Rolf Tamnes, “The Defence of Northern Europe,” *International Affairs*, Volume 100, Issue 2, March 2024, 813–824, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae019>.

312 There is a very strong argument that NATO should revisit its overall C2, not just that for the Northeast Quadrant. See, for example: Bagdonas, *Military Command and Control*; Richard D. Hooker Jr., *A New NATO Command Structure* (Atlantic Council, 2024), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/a-new-nato-command-structure/>.

report makes that the accession of Sweden and Finland, plus the increasing level of operational integration among the Nordic states, is precisely what will ameliorate the most critical operational and logistical difficulties in defending the Baltic states.

NATO inevitably must draw artificial lines or seams between JFC areas of operation somewhere, but the current lines delineating the boundaries between the Joint Force Command Norfolk and Brunssum AOs split the Northeast Quadrant in suboptimal and potentially dangerous ways. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the Nordic states and their militaries have multiple tasks and missions that are directly relevant to defense of the Baltic region. This could include, for example, airborne support (e.g., ISR, strike) to Baltic state defense, sea control and denial in the Baltic Sea, and reinforcement, logistics and sustainment flows to the Baltic region via the Nordic states. These and other tasks and missions risk becoming substantially more complicated, difficult, and slower in execution if the forces involved must frequently cross AO boundaries and shift from the OPCON of one JFC to another. In short, as rapidity of action becomes ever more critical to favorable combat outcomes, treating the Northeast Quadrant as a single coherent area of operations would significantly increase the efficacy of NATO's approach to defense of the alliance's northern and northeastern regions.

One could look to the Cold War C2 arrangements for inspiration, although those too were imperfect. During the Cold War, NATO's C2 design was guided by a "distinct regional philosophy," namely that the Central Front was the main theater and, as a result, other operational areas (e.g., the High North or the Mediterranean Sea) were subordinate to it.³¹³ Allied Forces Northern Europe (AFNORTH)—with its command based in Kolsås, Norway—was tasked with the defense of Norway, Denmark, and northern Germany.³¹⁴ Even then the entire Northeast Quadrant was not considered as a whole, with different NATO states, or even parts of a member state, assigned to different NATO commands.³¹⁵ Denmark and mainland Norway were in AFNORTH, which was subordinate to Allied Command Europe (ACE). Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Svalbard, Jan Mayen, and the surrounding seas were under Eastern Atlantic (EASTLANT), which was subordinate to Allied Command Atlantic (ACLANT). The English Channel and parts of the North Sea fell under Allied Command Channel (ACCHAN).

Today, adopting a new C2 structure featuring one unitary JFC area of operations that covers the entire Northeast Quadrant would be highly advantageous. This JFC area of operations

313 Pesu and Iso-Markku, *Finland as a NATO Ally: First Insights into Finnish Alliance Policy*, (Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), 2022), 23, <https://research.fi/en/results/publication/0676140322>.

314 Gregory W. Pedlow, *The Evolution of NATO's Command Structure, 1951-2009* (SHAPE Historical Office, n.d.), <https://shape.nato.int/resources/21/Evolution%20of%20NATO%20Cmd%20Structure%201951-2009.pdf>; Are Sandvik, *Headquarters Allied Forces Northern Europe, 1951-1994*, 1994, <https://archives.nato.int/headquarters-allied-forces-northern-europe-1951-1994>. For an overview of NATO's changing strategy, posture, and operational arrangements, see, for example: Diego Ruiz Palmer, "NATO's Military Transformations, 1949-2024," in Olsen, J.A. (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of NATO*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2024): p. 79-92.

315 Svein Ejfjstad, *Command and Control in Northern Europe: Challenges and Potential Solutions*, Policy Brief (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), November 2023).

ideally would include most of Denmark and Norway, northern Germany and Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, and Sweden. This would not preclude the transfer of authority or OPCON of some national forces to another JFC as operationally necessary or as directed by SACEUR. For example, Denmark and Norway could shift OPCON of selected forces and resources to JFC Brunssum if called upon to support Central European contingencies, and Germany and Poland could contribute selected forces to proximate Northeast Quadrant operations while maintaining other forces and resources under JFC Brunssum for operations elsewhere along NATO's frontiers with Russia and Belarus.

Regionally-Focused Investments and Planning

As the Northeast Quadrant nations and other NATO member states increase spending on national defense, their decisions regarding their armed forces' modernization and expansion and the associated investments should be informed by how they can contribute to optimizing integrated defense of the region as a whole.³¹⁶ This necessitates understanding the requirements for the defense of the nation, as well as of the region and NATO as a whole, and seeking complementarity with other member states to create an effective joint fighting force. This process is predominantly driven by NATO, where the NDPP designates priorities. That being said, NDPP processes are typically four years long.³¹⁷ Given the speed with which nations are now making investments, NATO defense planning and capability guidance processes need to be providing rapid, continuous advice to guide defense planning. Without such regular guidance, nations risk investing in capabilities based on national or homeland defense considerations with mixed levels of coordination with neighboring states. This could result in duplicative or non-interoperable capabilities.

Additionally, more frequent consultations among Northeast Quadrant members in a NATO forum could help ensure that investments being made are consistent with actual operational plans and requirements (including timelines for priority investments) for the region as a whole.³¹⁸ Regional planning and cooperation groups could also provide investment planning platforms in areas where NATO may be lagging or if additional coordinating functions could prove useful. For example, NATO could provide requirements for the effects that countries should be able to deliver but, e.g., NORDEFECO could help coordinate the acquisitions required to enable those effects in given Quadrant sub-regions. Investments that include

³¹⁶ Friis, "Reviving Nordic Security and Defense Cooperation," (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), October 27, 2024), <https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/reviving-nordic-security-and-defense-cooperation>.

³¹⁷ On the NDPP process, see: John R. Deni, *Security Threats, American Pressure, and the Role of Key Personnel: How NATO's Defence Planning Process Is Alleviating the Burden-Sharing Dilemma* (United States Army War College Press, 2020); Lapsley and Vandier, "Why NATO's Defence Planning Process Will Transform the Alliance for Decades to Come"; NATO, "NATO Defence Planning Process," NATO, April 16, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/introduction-to-nato/nato-defence-planning-process>.

³¹⁸ See, for example: Aaron Mehta, "Estonia's top military officer on putting aside national interests for regional defense," *Defense News*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/interviews/2020/03/16/estonias-top-military-officer-on-putting-aside-national-interests-for-regional-defense/>.

IAMD, counter-UAS (cUAS), and ISR ideally would be made on a region-wide basis for Baltic region defense.³¹⁹

Maximizing Sweden and Finland's Potential as Members

Sweden and Finland, as the alliance's newest members, have come a long way but still have much to do before their potential is fully realized. Both are increasing their defense budgets, but more may be needed. For example, CSBA exercises examining Finnish force structure conducted in support of this report suggest that the Finnish defense budget has relatively little room for flexibility. In 2025, Finland spent an estimated 2.77 percent of its GDP on defense.³²⁰ That is notable. However, although what Finland does spend on defense appears to be efficiently managed, even moderate-sized investment shifts within defense budgets for new capabilities may require outsized divestments of existing forces to meet budgetary caps. As Janne Kuusela, now Permanent Secretary of Finland's Ministry of Defense, said in 2023, "Joining NATO is an expensive business, and supporting Ukraine is an expensive business, and there's no end to that in sight."³²¹

There are several areas in which Finland will need to invest more resources. Despite a large pool of reserve manpower and significant mobilization potential, Finland will need to continue to invest in additional personnel if it is to meet NATO organizational staffing requirements. For example, one estimate holds that the Finnish Defense Forces will need 1,000 new positions—including 500 new officer positions—to fill NATO command postings.³²² However, there is no quick way to achieve this; every officer currently needs to do conscription before graduating from Cadet School to advance onwards.³²³ Finland also needs to sustain and replace many of its aging armored infantry fighting vehicles (IFV) and main battle tanks (MBT) as well as their supporting capabilities, and its multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) fleet needs mid-life upgrades.³²⁴ In addition, new areas of investment should include infrastructure to handle reception, staging, onward movement and integration (RSOI) of arriving allied forces, such as PREPO sites, as well as host nation support,

319 Douglas Barrie et al., *Northern Europe, The Arctic and The Baltic: The ISR Gap* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022), <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2022/12/northern-europe-the-arctic-and-the-baltic-the-isr-gap/>; Andrea Gilli et al., "Rearming Europe: Challenges and Constraints," *War on the Rocks*, April 15, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/04/rearming-europe-challenges-and-constraints-2/>; Paul van Hooft and Lotje Boswinkel, *Integrated Air and Missile Defence 2021-2035* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2021).

320 NATO, "Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)."

321 Steven Erlanger, "Finland Raced to Join NATO. What Happens Next Is Complicated," *The New York Times*, September 25, 2023.

322 Minna Ålander and Antti Pihlajamaa, "Finland's NATO Integration: A Subtle (R)Evolution," *European Review of International Studies* 11, no. 3 (2025): 395–96. Notably, this estimate was provided by the Finnish officer's union.

323 Ibid, 395–96.

324 Ministry of Defence (Finland), *Government Defence Report*, 39.

including basing facilities.³²⁵ Logistical infrastructure also needs to be improved, including expanded roll-on/roll-off (RoRo) port facilities, increased weightbearing capacity of bridges, and more railroads and roads.³²⁶

There are also interoperability issues as well as legal and cultural shifts facing Finland. For example, although the FDF were relatively interoperable with NATO prior to membership, Finland still has some way to go to fully meet NATO standards, including standards pertaining to indirect fire and C2 hardware compatibility.³²⁷ Finland continues to work through legal adjustments to enable NATO operations in the country. For example, as of April 2026, Finland is in the process of changing legislation to allow the transit and stationing of nuclear weapons on its territory to more closely align with NATO deterrence policy.³²⁸ The FDF's C2 and force structure was previously driven by homeland defense needs; in the context of NATO membership, these must be reviewed and updated.³²⁹

On the strategic cultural side, the FDF and the Finnish Ministry of Defense are working to become more comfortable sharing national-level information.³³⁰ According to two Finnish authors, Finland also only recently accepted the idea that exercises are not just a demonstration of capability and resolve but also a deterrence signal.³³¹

Sweden, with a larger defense budget and a more recent move towards focusing on defense after years spent deprioritizing security issues, has more wiggle room—and more ambition.³³² Swedish efforts are currently focused on improving the quality and readiness of its

325 John Deni, “Sweden and Finland Are on Their Way to NATO Membership. Here’s What Needs to Happen Next.”; Ministry of Defence (Finland), *Government Defence Report*, 67, 76–78.

326 Ibid.

327 Ålander and Pihlajamaa, “Finland’s NATO Integration,” 307.

328 Hallituksen esitys eduskunnalle laeiksi ydinenergialain sekä rikoslain 34 luvun 6 §:n muuttamisesta [Government proposal to Parliament to amend the Nuclear Energy Act and Chapter 34, Section 6 of the Criminal Code], PLM002:00/2026, accessed April 14, 2026, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/hanke?tunnus=PLM002:00/2026>; Jessica Rawnsley, “Finland Plans to Lift Decades-Old Ban on Hosting Nuclear Weapons,” *BBC*, March 5, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c14m5llnrlpo>.

329 Ministry of Defence (Finland), *Government Defence Report*, July 2024, 37.

330 For more on cultural adjustments, see, for example: Lawrence and Jermalavičius, *Finland and Sweden in NATO*, *International Centre for Defence and Security* (Estonia), March 20224, <https://icds.ee/en/the-newest-allies-finland-and-sweden-in-nato>; Charly Salenius-Pasternak, “Finland and Sweden in NATO: Completing the Mare Nostrum,” *International Centre for Defence and Security* (Estonia), May 20, 2022, <https://icds.ee/en/finland-and-sweden-in-nato-completing-the-mare-nostrum/>.

331 Pihlajamaa and Särkkä, “Finland and Collective Defence: The Finnish Role in Northern Europe and Beyond” in Joel Linnainmäki et al, *NATO’s New Northern Direction: The Evolving Role of the Alliance in Europe’s North*, (Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), April 2024), https://fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ffpp11_natos-new-northern-direction.pdf, 35.

332 On Swedish declarations about investment priorities, see: Försvarsbeslutet 2025–2030 [Defence Resolution 2025–2030], 2024/25:34 (2024), <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/totalforsvar/forsvarsbeslutet-20252030/>; Swedish Ministry of Defense, Stärkt försvarsförmåga.

armed forces, but their expansion will also be required.³³³ For example, the Swedish Armed Forces (SwAF) will need more personnel. Sweden's *Defense Resolution 2025-2030* establishes the goal of having 130,000 personnel (plus reserves) at wartime strength by 2035, up from 88,000 in late 2024.³³⁴ Investments will be made not only to increase the number of conscripts but also to expand officer training.³³⁵ In late 2022, the challenges became clear as about half of Sweden's fighter pilots had quit or taken extended leave, driven by poor pay as well as a higher retirement age.³³⁶

Many have assumed that Sweden will serve as a logistics hub for NATO's operations in northern and northeastern Europe, with requisite investments in mobility, basing, host nation support, and PREPO.³³⁷ However, as described in earlier chapters, Sweden will also need to invest in capabilities to operate across the entire Baltic Sea, including additional strike assets should NATO choose to adopt a more interdiction-heavy strategy.

Sweden should also match its ambitions with its resources pragmatically. For example, it has already committed to leading the FLF in Finland while also contributing to the FLF in Latvia. It is understandable and commendable that Stockholm wants to contribute and demonstrate its support to its Northeast Quadrant neighbors in this way. But realistically it may lack sufficient resources to do so. For example, having the Swedish army play a key role in defending the Baltic states may not be the most effective way for Sweden to buttress Baltic state defenses.³³⁸ Having one rotating battalion in FLF Latvia would in reality require 3-5 battalions to support such a rotation—and those forces might have other tasks and missions

333 Sweden's 2025 defense bill described the defense investment in the coming years as more qualitative than quantitative. *Försvarsbeslutet 2025–2030* [Defence Resolution 2025-2030], 11.

334 *Försvarsbeslutet 2025–2030* [Defence Resolution 2025-2030]; Piotr Szymański and Jacek Tarociński, "Sweden: Reinventing Total Defence and a Proactive Stance in NATO," *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, December 18, 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-12-18/sweden-reinventing-total-defence-and-a-proactive-stance-nato>.

335 *Försvarsbeslutet 2025–2030* [Defence Resolution 2025-2030], 89–92.

336 Sophie Bosdotter et al., "Why Fighter Pilots Are Leaving the Swedish Armed Forces – and How to Retain Them," *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 5, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.135>; Kajsa Ekström and Cajsa Sjöbeck, "Stridspiloten tar tjänstledigt: Lågt förtroende för Försvarsmaktens ledning [Fighter pilot takes leave of absence: Low confidence in the leadership of the Swedish Armed Forces]," *SVT Nyheter*, July 14, 2022, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/halften-av-stridspiloterna-slutar-till-hosten-citat>; Jan Kallberg, "The Swedish Fighter Pilot Crisis," (Center for European Policy Analysis, August 30, 2022), <https://cepa.org/article/the-swedish-fighter-pilot-crisis/>.

337 See, for example: Deni, "Sweden and Finland Are on Their Way to NATO Membership. Here's What Needs to Happen Next."; Friis, "Reviving Nordic Security and Defense Cooperation"; Jakub Graca and Jacek Tarociński, "Sweden in NATO: The Rear for the Alliance's North-Eastern Flank?," *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, November 23, 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-11-23/sweden-nato-rear-alliances-north-eastern-flank>; Jason C. Moyer, "From Partner to Ally: Sweden's First Year in NATO," (Wilson Center, March 7, 2025), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/partner-ally-swedens-first-year-nato>.

338 Håkan Edström, "An Offensive Nordic Focus for the Army?," (The Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences, March 2025), <https://kkrva.se/artiklar/ett-offensivt-nordiskt-fokus-for-armen/>.

(including homeland defense) in wartime.³³⁹ Instead of providing land forces, other options to aid Baltic states—such as strike and logistics—may be more feasible and useful.

Sweden, like Finland, also has strategic cultural and legal shifts before it. For example, in addition to the Swedish naval doctrinal shift from archipelagic defense to operating in the middle of the Baltic Sea described in Chapter 3, Swedish air defense will also need to shift doctrinally from local air defense to more regional air defense and counter-air operations farther from Sweden.³⁴⁰ As of late March 2026, the Swedish government was also investigating whether conscripts should be permitted to be sent to NATO missions abroad in peacetime.³⁴¹

Outside Players

Although the Northeast Quadrant concept should rely primarily on regional actors to provide the bulk of capabilities and to act as “first responders,” outside players will of course have a role.

For example, the United Kingdom does not lie within the geographic bounds of the Northeast Quadrant. However, given its location, it has direct national defense interests in helping to defend the maritime areas of the High North and the North Sea and the approaches to the Skagerrak and the Kattegat, both of which are deeply bound up with defense of the Northeast Quadrant. The UK also has a long history of strategic planning and large-area operational experience that the smaller nations comprising the Northeast Quadrant currently lack. Accordingly, it is not surprising that it has taken leadership roles in groups such as the JEF. As this report has suggested, in the Northeast Quadrant the UK's military capabilities are best leveraged in the High North and the Norwegian Sea. However, the UK, particularly as it inherits leadership of the existing JFC Norfolk, could play a significant coordinating role in the region.³⁴²

Other NATO members do—and should—also contribute to deterrence and defense within the Quadrant. For example, as described in Chapter 4, Belgium and the Netherlands could play an expanded role in protecting their ports from Russian maritime threats. Canada

339 Henningsson, “NATO membership may involve partly new tasks for Swedish ground combat forces,” (Royal Swedish Defence Agency (FOI), May 2024), https://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/foi_-_totalforsvarets_forskningsinstitut/news/natomedlemskapet-kan-innebaera-delvis-nya-uppgifter-foer-svenska-markstridskrafter-483889.

340 Henningsson, “The consequences of NATO membership in the air domain,” (Royal Swedish Defence Agency (FOI), April 2025), <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI-R--5746--SE>; and Lawrence and Jermalavičius, Finland and Sweden in NATO.

341 Andreas Öbrink, “Regeringen utreder att skicka värnpliktiga på Nato-uppdrag utomlands [Government investigates sending conscripts on NATO missions abroad],” *SVT Nyheter*, March 31, 2026, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/regeringen-utreder-att-skicka-varnpliktiga-pa-nato-uppdrag-utomlands>.

342 NATO, “European Allies to Take on New Leadership Roles in NATO's Command Structure,” NATO, February 6, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2026/02/06/european-allies-to-take-on-new-leadership-roles-in-natos-command-structure>.

should play an increased role in defending Greenland and the European High North. France adopted a formal Arctic Defence Strategy in 2025 and regularly participates in NATO exercises in the High North.³⁴³ Other members further from the Russia threat could also contribute to the ground defense of the Baltic states. Fungible and mobile assets—such as ISR and airborne platforms—from a variety of NATO member states could also be provided to the region as necessary.

Shaping the Northeast Quadrant's Strategic Environment

As NATO and Northeast Quadrant member states take increased deterrence and defense measures, they should also consider how to use their capabilities and force posture to proactively shape the Quadrant's operational environment to ensure that NATO can maximally exploit the battlespace advantages gained from Swedish and Finnish accession to the alliance, should it be forced to fight.³⁴⁴ A singular focus on deterrence risks being only reactive, thereby giving Russia the opportunity to recurrently test NATO members with potentially little consequence. As NATO develops new operational plans for the Northeast Quadrant, it should consider not only how to signal to Russia that the Quadrant is no easy target, but also how to take proactive measures that will put Moscow on the defensive.

Individually, NATO members already recognize that they are in peacetime competition with Russia. NATO as an organization has been slower to recognize the challenge and should fully come to grips with its consequences.³⁴⁵ It should also work to shape its strategic environment. The goal should be not just preventing Russia from taking any particular hostile action but convincing it to reduce its aggression against NATO in general. This requires actively changing the current status quo, not merely deterring actions that challenge it.

Thus, NATO and the Northeast Quadrant members in particular should work to shape Russian behavior and interests through competitive strategies.³⁴⁶ For example, demonstrating strike capabilities could induce Russia to invest more resources in areas like air and missile defense instead of devoting those resources to offensive systems. NATO exercises and force posture can also impose strategic and operational dilemmas on Russia. Of course, this needs to be balanced with efforts to reduce overall escalation risks and maintain

343 Ministry des Armées, *Arctic Defence Strategy*, July 10, 2025, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/dgris/Arctic%20defence%20Strategy_Full%20version.pdf.

344 This is related to using the U.S. concept of campaigning to improve warfighting. See: Becca Wasser, *Campaign of Denial: Strengthening Simultaneous Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific and Europe* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2023), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/campaign-of-denial>.

345 See also: Jamie Shea, *NATO in the Era of Global Complexity, New Perspectives on Shared Security: NATO's Next 70 Years* (Carnegie Europe, 2019), <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/11/28/nato-in-era-of-global-complexity-pub-80417>.

346 For an overview of competitive strategies, see: Thomas G. Mahnken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice* (Stanford Security Studies, 2012).

credible crisis communications.³⁴⁷ The goal is not to push Russia towards conflict, but rather to ensure that NATO is actively competing with Russia and shaping its behavior and capabilities in ways that benefit NATO's deterrence and defense.

The Northeast Quadrant as Exemplar

As this report argues, conceptualizing and treating the Northeast Quadrant as a single unified area of operations can be an exemplar for NATO of how to maximize regional deterrence and defense while concurrently strengthening the overall alliance. The existing and successful cooperation among Northeast Quadrant member states already demonstrates what regional groupings can accomplish, but fulfilling the requirements laid out in earlier chapters of this report could be the precursor to greater regionally-focused planning.³⁴⁸

Regionally-focused planning allows NATO to take advantage of existing defense tendencies and should encourage NATO to develop greater cohesion among neighboring member states. As discussed in Chapter 2, members of the Northeast Quadrant have a shared threat perception, a history of cooperation, and tailored defense capabilities. This degree of alignment may be unique to the Northeast Quadrant given the region's proximity and vulnerability to, and history with, Russia. Where such natural alignment may already exist, NATO should take advantage of those conditions. Where it does not exist, NATO should work to create a mechanism to develop greater regionally-focused threat alignment and cooperation.

NATO should continue to think geographically, as outlined in Chapter 2.³⁴⁹ The alliance has a long north-south geography, but it also has a significant west-east span. This west-east geography has often been manifested as a challenge centered on military mobility for transporting supplies and forces from western Europe to NATO's eastern frontier. However, as the recommended distribution of strike assets in Chapter 3 suggests, NATO should also see its latitudinal length as an advantage. The concept of the Northeast Quadrant also demonstrates how sub-regions can be connected and their defense considered holistically as, for example, with the High North and the Baltic states whose defense is deeply intertwined.

Lastly, regional defense industrial cooperation offers a promising path for multinational acquisition programs. Several multinational acquisition and development programs have been proposed and pursued within NATO, the European Union, and among both entities' member states. However, these have had mixed results, often as a result of different

347 For a study on U.S. military forward presence, below-threshold deterrence, and escalation, see: Stephen Watts et al., *Deterrence and Escalation in Competition with Russia: Executive Summary* (RAND Corporation, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA720-2.html.

348 See, for example: Minna Ålander, "The Nordic-Baltic Region: An Example for NATO," (Center for European Policy Analysis, February 9, 2024), <https://cepa.org/article/the-nordic-baltic-region-an-example-for-nato/>; Sophia Besch et al., *Rebalancing the Transatlantic Defense-Industrial Relationship: Regional Pragmatism in Northeastern Europe* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025); Friis, "Reviving Nordic Security and Defense Cooperation."

349 Mattelaer, "Rediscovering Geography in NATO Defence Planning."

requirements imposed on programs due to varied geographic needs and mission requirements.³⁵⁰ Encouraging multinational programs specific to regions with similar needs could accelerate purchases and deliveries while reducing unit costs, as exemplified by Sweden, Norway, and Lithuania jointly purchasing hundreds of CV90 combat vehicles.³⁵¹ That does not mean that cooperation in the Northeast Quadrant has been perfect, but it is an ideal test case from which to learn.³⁵²

The Role of the United States

Of note, the initiatives suggested in this report—if the proposed organizational arrangements and associated investments were fully realized—are timely for NATO in that they do not rely heavily on a forward or reinforced U.S. presence. Given the uncertainty expressed by many European member states regarding the future role of the United States in NATO, one message has become crystal clear: non-U.S. NATO members need to do more in the defense of Europe. Regardless of the level of future engagement the United States will have as part of the alliance, it is European NATO members that will need to be, at a minimum, the first responders to any crisis or conflict on the continent.

The initiatives proposed in this report do not rely on the United States playing a leading role in any conflict scenarios. Instead, the regional actors within the Northeast Quadrant can use a range of deterrence and defense approaches—from deterrence by denial through forward defense and interdiction along NATO’s border with Russia to quick-reaction forces and a greater maritime presence in the High North—that, while supported by the United States, do not necessarily depend heavily on a significant U.S. presence in the region.

That does not mean that there is no role for the United States. First, it should provide clarity regarding its intended future commitments to NATO—and, importantly, timelines for any reduction of forces or types of support. This would enable NATO and the members of the Northeast Quadrant in particular to better prepare for the future in terms of defense spending and planning. The United States should thus seek to be transparent and communicative with its NATO allies about its own plans and considerations.

Second, as NATO invests in the required Northeast Quadrant capabilities described earlier, the United States may need to maintain a strong presence in the region to deter Russian

350 Sean Monaghan, “Solving Europe’s Defense Dilemma: Overcoming the Challenges to European Defense Cooperation,” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/solving-europes-defense-dilemma-overcoming-challenges-european-defense-cooperation>.

For updates since 2022, see: James Hackett and Benjamin Schreer, eds., “Transforming European Defence Procurement and Industry,” in *Progress and Shortfalls in Europe’s Defence: An Assessment*, by Douglas Barrie et al. (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025), 61–63, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003715054>.

351 Elisabeth Braw, “A Massive Shared Military Deal May Be Europe’s Future,” *Foreign Policy*, May 5, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/05/05/europe-russia-cv90-joint-procurement-defense/>.

352 Besch et al., *Rebalancing the Transatlantic Defense-Industrial Relationship*.

aggression while the Northeast Quadrant concept fully takes form. This timing dovetails in some ways with Russia's current weakness while it continues to fight in Ukraine and cannot turn fully to rebuilding the military forces that could threaten the Quadrant. Still, the signal of a strong U.S. commitment to the region would likely reduce any immediate Russian temptation to attack. In the short-term, this may mean that the United States provide sufficient strike capacity to enable interdiction of attacking Russian forces and IAMD assets to protect critical European targets while NATO, and the Northeast Quadrant countries in particular, develop their own capabilities and capacities in those areas.

Third, the United States could enable European NATO members to place more emphasis on interdiction by continuing to provide ISR for surveilling, targeting, and battle damage assessment.³⁵³ The United States has unique, exquisite ISR capabilities that NATO will find it hard to replace in the short- to medium-term. Continuing to provide these capabilities rather than combat forces may be more palatable to future U.S. administrations since it would allow Washington to preserve combat capabilities for other potential conflicts, including in the Indo-Pacific. Even as the United States provides additional exquisite ISR assets, European allies should work to increase their own multi-domain ISR capabilities and capacities in the region. In the event of war, the United States could also provide additional specialized capabilities such as aerial refueling to enable multi-axis strikes and C2 support across the alliance.

Fourth, the United States' nuclear deterrent remains irreplaceable and critical to NATO defense. Despite significant discussion about the development of a stronger independent European nuclear deterrent, the British and French nuclear deterrents simply cannot replace that of the United States.³⁵⁴ Furthermore, it is unclear if Russia would respect a European nuclear deterrent to the same degree that it respects the U.S. nuclear deterrent, in part because Russian strategic thinking has traditionally used the United States as a reference point.³⁵⁵ That does not necessarily mean that the United Kingdom and France should not play a greater role in Europe's nuclear deterrent posture and signaling, but it does suggest

353 Barrie et al., *Northern Europe, The Arctic and The Baltic*; Gilli et al., "Rearming Europe."

354 Examples of the discussion include: Jan Philipp Burgard, "Europe Needs Its Own Nukes," *POLITICO*, April 8, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2025/04/08/nuclear-weapons-europe-defense-trump-00278754>; Eric S. Edelman and Franklin C. Miller, "America's Nuclear Umbrella Is Open and Must Stay Open," *The Bulwark*, April 3, 2025, <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/americas-nuclear-umbrella-open-trump-macron-france-britain>; Héloïse Fayet, Andrew Futter, and Ulrich Kühn, "Forum: Towards a European Nuclear Deterrent," *Survival* 66, no. 5 (2024); Héloïse Fayet, Andrew Futter, Ulrich Kühn, et al., "Forum: European Nuclear Deterrence and Donald Trump," *Survival* 67, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2459011>; Laura Kayali et al., "Europe Is Quietly Debating a Nuclear Future Without the US," *POLITICO*, July 4, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/07/04/europe-us-nuclear-weapons-00166070>; Tim Ross et al., "Europe Targets Homegrown Nuclear Deterrent as Trump Sides with Putin," *POLITICO*, February 21, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-nuclear-weapons-nato-donald-trump-vladimir-putin-friedrich-merz/>.

355 On Russian perceptions of the British and French nuclear deterrents, see: Zsafia Wolford et al., *Evolving Russian Perceptions of the British and French Nuclear Deterrents* (RAND Corporation, 2025), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3900-1.html.

the importance of a continued nuclear deterrence role for the United States, one that enables Europe to focus more heavily on its conventional contribution.

The Way Forward

NATO is an alliance that has survived more than 75 years of changes to its strategic environment, alliance relations, and domestic politics. It has done so through repeated adaptation.³⁵⁶ As NATO faces yet another shift in its political and operational environments, it is time for another set of adaptations.

The Northeast Quadrant concept holds the potential to become an exemplar for NATO as it seeks to exploit the accession of Sweden and Finland. The concept, if properly implemented, could provide inspiration for a division of labor in which Europeans provide the majority of NATO's conventional military power, supported by specialized U.S. information and other advanced capabilities, as well as the U.S. nuclear deterrent. This approach could enable a NATO deterrence by denial posture that is complemented by deterrence by punishment from both conventional and nuclear strike.³⁵⁷

In a sense, Sweden and Finland's membership in NATO represents two final puzzle pieces being laid on the board, filling out and thus enabling NATO's Northeast Quadrant. Their membership enables NATO to think holistically about this region, create new defense plans enabled by its geography, and better leverage the advanced military capabilities that Sweden and Finland bring to the alliance. By conceptualizing the Northeast Quadrant as a unified area of operations, NATO and its member states can strengthen defense of the region and indeed of the alliance as a whole.

Taking full advantage of the promise of the Northeast Quadrant will require significant intellectual and material work. However, the region is poised to take on these challenges and can provide a model for other parts of the alliance, particularly as NATO seeks to adjust to the renewed threat posed by Russia, rebalance the transatlantic division of labor, and most effectively invest its increased defense spending to enhance its overall combat power.

356 Seth A. Johnston, *How NATO Adapts: Strategy and Organization in the Atlantic Alliance since 1950* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

357 Ellison and Sweijts make a similar suggestion. Davis Ellison and Tim Sweijts, *Nuclear-Conventional Force Balancing and the European Deterrence Architecture* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2026).

LIST OF ACRONYMS

A2/AD	anti-area/anti-access denial
AC	army corps
ACCHAN	Allied Command Channel
ACE	Allied Command Europe
ACLANT	Allied Command Atlantic
AFNORTH	Allied Forces Northern Europe
ALOC	air line of communication
AMD	air and missile defense
AO	area of operations
AOR	area of responsibility
ASCM	anti-ship cruise missile
ASW	anti-submarine warfare
BDA	battle damage assessment
C2	command and control
CAOC	Combined Air Operations Center
CAS	close air support
CHOP	change of operational control
CTF	Commander Task Force
cUAS	counter-UAS
DCA	defense cooperation agreement
DDA	Concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area
DEAD	destruction of enemy air defenses
DIB	defense industrial base
EASTLANT	Eastern Atlantic
eFP	enhanced Forward Presence
ELSA	European Long-Range Strike Approach
FDF	Finnish Defence Forces
FLF	Forward Land Forces
GIUK	Greenland, Iceland, and United Kingdom
GLOC	ground line of communication
G-RAMM	guided rockets, artillery, mortars, and missiles
HQ	headquarter
IAMD	integrated air and missile defense

IFV	infantry fighting vehicle
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
JEF	Joint Expeditionary Force
JFC	Joint Force Command
LACM	land attack cruise missile
LMD	Leningrad Military District
LOC	line of communication
LRPS	long-range precision strike
MARCOM	Maritime Command
MBT	main battle tank
MLRS	multiple launch rocket system
NAC	North Atlantic Council
NAPC	Nordic Air Power Concept
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
NDPP	NATO Defense Planning Process
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NORDEFCO	Nordic Defense Cooperation
NSIRF	NATO ISR Force
NSS	National Security Strategy
OPCOM	operational command
OPCON	operational control
PGW	precision-guided weapon
PREPO	prepositioned equipment, material, and supplies
PrSM	Precision Strike Missile
RoRo	roll-on/roll-off
RSOI	reception, staging, onward movement, and integration
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander
SEAD	suppression of enemy air defenses
SIGINT	signals intelligence
SLOC	sea line of communication
SNMG1	Multinational Standing NATO Maritime Group 1
SPOD	sea port of debarkation
SSBN	ballistic missile submarine

SwAF	Swedish Armed Forces
TOA	transfer of authority
TTP	tactics, techniques, and procedures
UAS	unmanned aerial system
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
USEUCOM	U.S. European Command
UUV	unmanned underwater vehicle



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