

Issue brief: A NATO strategy for countering Russia

Through military aggression, annexation, subversion and sabotage, Russia continues to undermine the security of Europe and the United States. A NATO strategy is necessary to effectively counter this threat going forward.

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Key takeaways

- Russia is the most direct and significant threat to the security of NATO member states—and since Moscow’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 this threat continues to grow. It now encompasses the war in Ukraine, the militarization of the Arctic, hybrid warfare, and violations of arms control treaties.
- While NATO holds a significant advantage over Russia in military and economic power, an effective and unified strategy is needed to counter Russia’s aggression and fully harness the Alliance’s collective capabilities.
- To effectively counter Russia, NATO must defeat Russia in Ukraine, deter Russian aggression against NATO allies and partners, contain Russian influence beyond its borders, and degrade Russia’s ability and will to accomplish its revisionist agenda. That will require, among other actions, a significant increase of support and commitment to Ukraine’s defense against Russia, and a more robust Alliance force posture including the modernization of its nuclear deterrent, the permanent stationing of brigade elements along NATO’s eastern frontier and increased defense industrial capacities.

Russia is “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security.” So states the NATO Strategic Concept promulgated at the Alliance’s Madrid Summit in June 2022, just four months after Russia’s massive escalation of its invasion of Ukraine.¹ The concept and NATO declarations not only underscore the illegality and brutality of that ongoing attack but also highlight Moscow’s use of nuclear and conventional military aggression, annexation, subversion, sabotage, and other forms of coercion and violence against NATO allies and partners.

Ever since its invasion of Georgia in 2008, Russia’s aggression against the Alliance has steadily intensified. This led NATO leaders at their 2024 Washington Summit to task the development of “recommendations on NATO’s strategic approach to Russia, taking into account the changing security environment.”² The Alliance’s “Russia strategy” is due for consideration at NATO’s next summit at The Hague in June 2025.³

1. “NATO Strategic Concept,” June 29, 2022, <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/>.
2. Washington Summit Declaration, issued by NATO heads of state and government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington, DC, July 10, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/ar/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm.
3. Washington Summit Declaration.

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— Stephen Biegun,
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This issue brief reviews Moscow’s actions affecting the security of the Euro-Atlantic area and presents the enduring realities, objectives, and actions that should constitute the core of an effective NATO strategy to counter the threat posed by Russia.

■ Intensified and globalized Russian aggression

Russia’s objectives go far beyond the subordination of Ukraine. Moscow seeks to reassert hegemony and control over the space of the former Soviet Union, diminish the power of the democratic community of nations, and delegitimize the international rules-based order. Moscow aims to subjugate its neighbors and to weaken—if not shatter—NATO, the key impediment to its European ambitions.

Toward these ends and under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, Russia:

- Has illegally occupied Moldova’s Transnistria region since the early 1990s.
- Invaded Georgia in 2008, has continued to occupy portions of that country, and recently increased its influence, if not control, over the nation’s governance.
- Invaded Ukraine in 2014 and significantly escalated this ongoing war in February 2022.
- Militarized the Arctic by increasing its military presence in the region, including through reopening Soviet-era bases and building new facilities to buttress Russian territorial claims over Arctic waters.
- Leveraged trade and energy embargoes and other forms of economic pressure to intimidate and coerce its European neighbors.
- Conducts an escalating campaign of active measures short of war against NATO allies and partners, including information warfare, election interference, sabotage, assassination, weaponized migration, cyberattacks, GPS jamming, and other actions.
- Expanded its conventional and nuclear military capabilities, an effort that was part of President Putin’s preparations to invade Ukraine.
- Violated, suspended, and abrogated international arms control agreements, including New START Treaty, the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), the Open Skies Agreement, and others.⁴

■ Enduring realities

A NATO strategy to counter Russia’s aggression is long overdue. Its absence cedes to Russia the initiative, leaving the Alliance too often in a reactive, if not indecisive and passive, posture in this relationship. An effective strategy requires recognition of nine enduring realities:

First, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was a failure of deterrence. The weakness of the Alliance’s response to Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine, NATO’s failure to respond forcefully to Russia’s months long mobilization of forces along Ukraine’s frontiers in 2021, and NATO’s acquiescence to Putin’s exercise of nuclear coercion emboldened and facilitated Putin’s actions against Ukraine. As a result, the credibility of the Alliance’s commitment to defend resolutely its interests and values has been damaged.

4. See Mathias Hammer, “The Collapse of Global Arms Control,” *Time Magazine*, November 13, 2023, <https://time.com/6334258/putin-nuclear-arms-control/>.



A Grad-P Partizan single rocket launcher is fired towards Russian troops by members of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region. (Credit: REUTERS/Stringer January 21, 2025).

Second, Russia is at war, not just against Ukraine. It is also at war against NATO.

The Alliance can no longer approach the relationship as one of competition or confrontation considering the military invasions, active measures, and other forms of violence and coercion Russia has undertaken against NATO allies and partners.⁵ As former US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun has written, "Quite simply, Putin has declared war on the West, but the West does not yet understand we are at war with Russia."⁶ By failing to recognize this reality, NATO has ceded escalation dominance to Russia as evidenced by its limiting of support to Ukraine and its inaction against repeated Russian aggression and provocations. The Alliance must recognize and act upon the reality that Moscow has pushed the NATO-Russia relationship into the state of war.

Third, NATO faces long-term conflict with Russia.

Putin cannot be expected to abandon his ambitions, even if defeated in Ukraine. Ever since Putin's speech before the February 2007 Munich Security Conference in which he railed against the international order and NATO's expanding

membership, Russia's campaign to subjugate its neighbors and to intimidate, divide, and weaken the Alliance has been unceasing and relentless. Nor can the Alliance assume that Putin's successor will significantly diverge from the objectives and policies that drive Russia's actions today. Peaceful coexistence with Russia is not attainable in the short to medium term and will be difficult to attain in the long term.

Fourth, Russia will continue efforts to increase the size and capability of its armed forces.

While Russian land forces have suffered significant losses in its invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has reconstituted that force faster than expected. Russia's land forces were estimated to be 15 percent larger in April 2024 than when Russia attacked Kyiv in February 2022.⁷ Earlier this year, Russia announced new ambitious plans to restructure and expand

5. For more information about active measures, see Mark Galeotti, "Active Measures: Russia's Covert Geopolitical Operations," *Strategic Insights*, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, June 2019, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/active-measures-russias-covert-geopolitical-operations-0>.
6. Stephen E. Biegun, "The Path Forward," in *Russia Policy Platform*, Vandenberg Coalition and McCain Institute, 2024, 32-36, <https://vandenbergc coalition.org/the-russia-policy-platform/>.
7. US Military Posture and National Security Challenges in Europe, Hearing Before the House Armed Services Comm., 118th Cong. (2024), (statement of Gen. Christopher G. Cavoli, Commander, US European Command), <https://www.eucom.mil/about-the-command/2024-posture-statement-to-congress>.

1991

The Soviet Union collapses.

1997

NATO and Russia agree to the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which outlines opportunities for cooperation.

2008

Russia invades Georgia and today continues to occupy the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

2014

Russia invades Ukraine, seizing the Crimean peninsula and parts of eastern Ukraine.

2022

The Kremlin launches its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, escalating the Russo-Ukrainian War.

At the NATO Summit in Madrid, NATO leaders agree that Russia is the alliance's "most significant and direct threat."

its ground forces to 1.5 million active personnel.⁸ Moreover, the Russian air force and navy have not been significantly degraded by the war against Ukraine. Russia's air force has only lost some 10 percent of its aircraft. While Russian naval ships have been destroyed in the Black Sea, Russian naval activity worldwide has increased.⁹

Similarly, Russian nuclear forces have been unaffected by the conflict in Ukraine. Russia retains the world's largest arsenal of deployed and nondeployed nuclear weapons and continues to develop new models of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) and intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBM), hypersonic boost-glide vehicles, nuclear-powered cruise missiles, nuclear-powered subsurface drones, antisatellite weapons, and orbital space weapons.¹⁰

With some 6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) being directed to its military, Moscow is investing to increase its defense-industrial and research and development capacities.¹¹ Russia's industrial base produces more ammunition than that produced by all NATO members and is fielding new high-tech weapons systems, such as the nuclear-capable multiple warhead IRBM Oreshnik Russia, which was demonstrated in combat against Ukraine last November.¹²

In April 2024, NATO SACEUR General Christopher Cavoli testified to the US Congress that:

Russia is on track to command the largest military on the continent and a defense industrial complex capable of generating substantial amounts of ammunition and material in support of large-scale combat operations. Regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, Russia will be larger, more lethal and angrier with the West than when it invaded.¹³

Fifth, Moscow's aggressive actions short of war will continue and escalate. Putin has yet to face a response from the Alliance that will dissuade him from further exercising information warfare, cyber warfare, energy and trade embargoes, assassination, GPS jamming, sabotage, fomenting separatist movements, and other forms of hybrid warfare. These actions are intended to intimidate governments; weaken the credibility of the Alliance's security guarantee; create and exacerbate internal divisions; and divide allies, among other objectives. Left unchecked, they threaten to undermine the Alliance's ability to attain consensus necessary to take decisive action against Russia.

Sixth, Moscow's exercise of nuclear coercion will continue as a key element of Russia's strategy and should be expected to intensify. Threats of nuclear warfare are a key element of Putin's strategy to preclude NATO and its members from providing Ukraine support that would enable it to decisively defeat Russia's invasion. This repeated exercise

8. Andrew Osborn, "Putin Orders Russian Army to Become Second Largest After China's at 1.5 Million-strong," *Reuters*, September 16, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-orders-russian-army-grow-by-180000-soldiers-become-15-million-strong-2024-09-16/>.

9. US Military Posture Hearing (statement of Gen. Cavoli).

10. US Military Posture Hearing (statement of Gen. Cavoli).

11. Pavel Luzin and Alexandra Prokopenko, "Russia's 2024 Budget Shows It's Planning for a Long War in Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 11, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/09/russias-2024-budget-shows-its-planning-for-a-long-war-in-ukraine>.

12. "How Does Russia's New 'Oreshnik' Missile Work?," Reuters video, November 28, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYKDNSYw1NQ>.

13. US Military Posture Hearing (statement of Gen. Cavoli).



A destroyed Russian tank remains on the side of the road near the town of Kreminna in Ukraine's Luhansk region amid Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. (Credit: REUTERS/Violeta Santos Moura March 24, 2023.)

of nuclear coercion includes verbal threats from President Putin and other senior Russian officials; the launching of nuclear capable ICBMs; the use of a nuclear capable IRBM against Ukraine, the first use of such a system in a conflict; nuclear weapons exercises; and the deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus, according to both Russia and Belarus.¹⁴ NATO allies have repeatedly rewarded this coercion by expressing fear of nuclear war; declaring that NATO forces will not enter Ukraine; restricting NATO's role in assisting Ukraine; limiting the flow of weapons to Ukraine; and restricting their use against legitimate military targets in Russia. Rewarding nuclear coercion encourages its repeated exercise and escalation. It risks leading Russia to conclude it has attained escalation dominance. A key challenge for NATO going forward will be to demonstrate that Russia's threats of nuclear strikes are counterproductive, and the Alliance cannot be deterred by nuclear coercion.

Seventh, Moscow is conducting a global campaign of aggression to weaken the democratic community of nations and the

rules-based international order. Over the last two decades, Russia has exercised its military, informational, and economic assets to generate anti-Western sentiment across the globe, including in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific region. This has included military support to authoritarian, anti-Western regimes well beyond Europe, including Venezuela, Syria, and Mali.

The most concerning element of Russia's global campaign is the partnerships it has operationalized with China, Iran, and North Korea. Russia's "no limits partnership" with China enables Putin to mitigate the impacts of Western sanctions on his war economy. Both Iran and North Korea have provided Russia with weapons and ammunition, and North Korean soldiers have joined Russia's fight against Ukraine. In return, Russia has supplied missile and nuclear technologies, oil and gas, and economic support to these nations that enables them to stoke violence across the Middle East, threaten the Korean Peninsula, and drive forward Beijing's hegemonic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region.

Eighth, an effective Russia strategy will require a coordinated leveraging of all the instruments of power available through the Alliance, its member states, and its key partners, including the European Union. This includes the application of diplomatic,

14. "Ukraine War: Putin Confirms First Nuclear Weapons Moved to Belarus," BBC, June 17, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65932700>; and Associated Press, "Belarus Has Dozens of Russian Nuclear Weapons and Is Ready for Its Newest Missile, Its Leader Says," via ABC News, December 10, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/belarus-dozens-russian-nuclear-weapons-ready-newest-missile-116640354>.

economic, ideological, informational, and other elements of power—none of which are the Alliance’s primary capacity, military power—that can be marshaled through its members states and multinational institutions, such as the European Union, where the Alliance and its member states have influence and authority.

Ninth, NATO significantly overmatches Russia in military and economic power.

NATO Headquarters estimates the combined GDP of Alliance member states to be \$54 trillion, more than twenty-five times Russia’s estimated GDP of more than \$2 trillion.¹⁵ The combined defense budget of NATO members amounts to approximately \$1.5 trillion,¹⁶ more than ten times that of Russia’s publicly projected defense budget of \$128 billion for 2025.¹⁷ This imbalance of power favoring the Alliance will be enduring and makes the execution of an effective Russia strategy not a matter of capacity, but one of strategic vision and political will.

■ Core objectives

To counter the direct and significant threat posed by Moscow, a NATO strategy for Russia should be structured around four core objectives:¹⁸

- **Defeat Russia in Ukraine:** NATO must defeat Russia’s war against Ukraine. This is its most urgent priority. Failure to do so—and failure includes the conflict’s perpetuation—increases the risk of a wider war in Europe and will encourage other adversaries around the world to pursue their revisionist and hegemonic ambitions. Russia’s decisive defeat in Ukraine is essential to return stability to Europe and to reinforce the credibility of the Alliance’s deterrent posture.
- **Deter aggression by Russia:** A key Alliance priority must be the effective deterrence of Russia aggression against the Alliance. A robust conventional and nuclear posture that deters Russian military aggression is far less costly than an active war. Deterrence must also be more effectively exercised against Russia’s actions short of war. Failure to deter aggression in this domain can undermine confidence in the Alliance and increase the risk of war.
- **Contain Russia’s influence and control:** The Alliance must actively contain Russia’s efforts to assert influence and control beyond its borders. The Alliance must assist Europe’s non-NATO neighbors in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and in Central Asia to strengthen their defenses and resilience to Russian

15. “Defense Expenditures of NATO Countries (2014-2024),” Press Release, NATO Public Diplomacy Division, June 12, 2024, 7, https://www.nato.int/cps/is/natohq/topics_49198.htm.

16. “Defense Expenditures of NATO Countries (2014-2024).”

17. Pavel Lugin, “Russia Releases Proposed Military Budget for 2025,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 21, no. 134, Jamestown Foundation, October 3, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-releases-proposed-military-budget-for-2025/>.

18. These core objectives are derived in significant part from the writings of Stephen E. Biegun and Ambassador Alexander Vershbow. Biegun calls for “a new Russia policy for the United States...built around three goals: defeat, deter, and contain.” See: https://vanderbergcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/8_The-Path-Forward-Beigun.pdf published November 21, 2024. See also: Alexander Vershbow, “Russia Policy After the War: A New Strategy of Containment,” *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council blog, February 22, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-policy-after-the-war-a-new-strategy-of-containment/>.

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pressure. NATO and NATO allies should also work to counter and roll back Russia’s influence and engagement around the globe.

- **Degrade Russia’s capabilities and determination:** A core objective for the Alliance should include weakening Russia’s capacity and will to pursue its hegemonic ambitions. Denying Russia access to international markets would further degrade its economy, including its defense-industrial capacity. Active engagement of the Russian public and other key stakeholders should aim to generate opposition to Putin and the Kremlin’s international aggression.

Achievement of these objectives would compel the Kremlin to conclude that its revanchist ambitions, including the diminishment or destruction of NATO, are unachievable and self-damaging. It would diminish Russia’s will and ability to continue aggression in Europe and weaken the impact of Russia’s partnerships, including with China, Iran, and North Korea. In addition, achieving these objectives would return a modicum of stability to Europe that in the long-term would enhance the prospects for NATO’s peaceful coexistence with Russia.

■ Recommended actions

A NATO strategy to defeat, deter, contain, and degrade Russian aggression and influence should effectuate the following actions by the Alliance, its member states, and partners:

- **Defeat Russia in Ukraine and accelerate Ukraine’s accession into the NATO alliance.** Defeating Russian aggression against Ukraine requires its own strategy, which should feature five key elements: adopting Ukraine’s war objectives, including total territorial reconstitution (i.e., the Alliance must never recognize Russian sovereignty over the territories it illegally seized from Ukraine); maximizing the flow of military equipment and supplies to Ukraine, free of restrictions on their use against legitimate military targets in Russia; imposing severe economic sanctions on Russia; deploying aggressive information operations to generate opposition in Russia against Putin’s aggression; and presenting a clear, accelerated path for Ukraine to NATO membership. NATO membership, and the security guarantee it provides, would add real risk and complexity to Russian military planning. NATO membership for Ukraine is the only way to convince the Kremlin that Ukraine cannot be subject to Russian hegemony and would provide security conditions needed for Ukraine’s rapid reconstruction and economic integration into Europe.
- **Fulfill and operationalize NATO’s regional defense plans.** To establish a credible and effective deterrent against Russian military aggression, NATO allies must:
 - **Build and deploy the requisite national forces.** Military plans are no more than visions in the absence of required capabilities. NATO’s European and Canadian allies need to generate more forces, with requisite firepower, mobility, and enabling capacities. In short, given European allies’ obligations under NATO’s new regional defense plans, they must act with urgency.
 - **Strengthen transatlantic defense industrial capacity.** High intensity warfare, as seen in Ukraine, consumes massive amounts of weapons stocks, much of which have to be in a near constant state of modernization to match the technological adaptations of the adversary. Today, the Alliance has struggled (and often failed) to match the defense-industrial capacity of Russia and its partners. NATO’s defense industrial base must expand its production capacities and its ability to rapidly develop, update, and field weapons systems.
 - **Increase allied defense spending to the equivalent of 5 percent of GDP.** To facilitate the aforementioned requirements and to address emerging challenges

beyond Europe that could simultaneously challenge the transatlantic community, NATO allies need to increase the agreed floor of defense spending from 2 percent to 5 percent and fulfill that new commitment with immediacy. NATO members cannot allow themselves to be forced to choose between defending against Russia and another geopolitical challenge beyond Europe.

- **Terminate the NATO Russia Founding Act (NRFA).** Russia has repeatedly and blatantly violated the principles and commitments laid out in the Founding Act. Russia's actions include having invaded Ukraine both in 2014 and in 2022, using nuclear coercion and escalatory rhetoric to pressure the Alliance, and deploying nonstrategic nuclear weapons to Belarus, as both Russia and Belarus have affirmed. Consequently, NATO should formally render the NRFA defunct, including the Alliance's commitments to:
 - **Adhere to the “three nuclear no’s”** that NATO member states “have no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO’s nuclear posture or nuclear policy – and do not foresee any future need to do so.”¹⁹
 - **Abstain from permanently stationing “substantial combat forces” in Central and Eastern Europe.**²⁰
- **Update NATO’s nuclear force posture.** In response to Russia’s modernization of its nuclear arsenal, exercise of nuclear coercion, and adjustments to its nuclear strategy that lowers the threshold for first use of nuclear weapons, the Alliance must update its own nuclear posture. The objectives should be to provide NATO with a broader and more credible spectrum of nuclear weapons options. An updated force posture would improve NATO’s ability to manage, if not dominate, the ladder of conflict escalation, complicate Russian military planning, and thereby weaken Moscow’s confidence in its own military posture and its strategy of nuclear “escalation to de-escalate.” Toward these ends, the Alliance should:
 - **Increase the spectrum of NATO’s nuclear capabilities.** This should include a nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) and a ground-launched variant. The breadth and number of NATO nuclear weapons exercises, such as the yearly Steadfast Noon, should be expanded and further integrated with exercises of conventional forces.
 - **Expand the number of members participating in the Alliance’s nuclear sharing agreements.** Doing so will expand the tactical options available to NATO and underscore more forcefully Alliance unity behind its nuclear posture.
 - **Broaden the number and locations of infrastructure capable of hosting the Alliance’s nuclear posture.** The Alliance’s nuclear posture still relies solely on Cold War legacy infrastructure in Western Europe. Given the threat posed by Russia, NATO should establish facilities capable of handling nuclear weapons and dual-capable systems, including nuclear weapons storage sites, in NATO member states along its eastern frontier.

19. See the NATO-Russia Founding Act, “Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation,” NATO, May 27, 1997, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_25468.htm.

20. NATO-Russia Founding Act.



NATO leaders stand together for a photo at NATO's 75th anniversary summit in Washington in July 2024. (Credit: REUTERS/Yves Herman July 10, 2024).

- **Reinforce NATO's eastern flank.** Russia's assault on Ukraine and its growing provocations against NATO member states and partners underscore the need to further reinforce the Alliance's eastern frontier. To date, NATO's deployments along its eastern flank amount to more of a trip-wire force rather than one designed for a strategy of defense by denial. To give greater credibility to the Alliance's pledge not to "cede one inch" when considering a potential attack by Russia, NATO should:

- **Establish a more robust permanent military presence along the Alliance's eastern frontier.** NATO is expanding its eight multinational battlegroups deployed to Central and Eastern Europe. But each of these deployments should be further upgraded to full brigades that are permanently stationed there. These elements should feature

robust enabling capacities, particularly air and missile defenses and long-range fires. If the United States is expected to sustain a presence of 100,000 troops in Europe, the least Western Europe and Canada can do is to forward station some 32,000 troops combined in Central and Eastern Europe.

- **Conduct large-scale, concentrated exercises on NATO's eastern flank.** The Alliance has commendably reanimated its emphasis on large-scale joint military exercises. However, those exercises have yet to be concentrated on NATO's eastern flank. Doing so would enhance readiness, reassure the Alliance's Central and Eastern European member states, and demonstrate resolve and preparedness in the face of Russian aggression.
- **Upgrade the Alliance's air defense and ballistic missile defense systems to more robustly address Russian threats.** In its attacks on Ukraine, Russia has demonstrated with brutality its emphasis on missile and long-range drone strikes against military and civilian targets. As part of its efforts to upgrade its air and missile defense capacities, NATO should direct the European Phased Adaptive Approach to address threats from Russia.²¹
- **Expand the NATO SACEUR's authority to order deployments and conduct operations along NATO's eastern frontier.** The Alliance's regional defense plans are said to provide SACEUR with greater authority to activate and deploy NATO forces *before* crisis and conflict situations. Due to the aggressiveness of Russia's ambitions, NATO should consider further expanding those authorities as they relate to the deployment and missions of forces along the Alliance's

21. Jaganath Sankaran, "The United States' European Phased Adaptive Missile Defense System," RAND Corporation, February 13, 2015, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR957.html.

eastern frontier. The actions of a deterrent force can be even more important than the magnitude of their presence.

- **Augment the Alliance’s posture in the Arctic.** Russia has heavily militarized the Arctic, upgraded the status and capability of its Northern Fleet, and deepened its military cooperation with China in the region while the Kremlin continues to assert Arctic territorial claims that conflict with those of NATO allies. While NATO has been increasing the tempo of its Arctic operations and improving its Arctic capabilities, Russia continues to pose a significant threat in the region and possibly outmatches the Alliance in the High North. To further reinforce deterrence against Russian aggression in the Arctic, the Alliance should:
 - **Develop a comprehensive NATO strategy to defend its interests in the High North.** Such a document would underscore the Alliance’s commitment to the region and help foster allied investments in infrastructure, capabilities, and training needed to defend and deter Russian threats in the High North.
 - **Establish a NATO Arctic Command and Joint Force.** The Arctic poses a unique set of geographic and climatic challenges requiring tailored operational capabilities. A command and air-ground-naval force focused specifically on the High North would provide the Alliance a dedicated and tailored deterrent to counter Russian aggression in the Arctic.²²
- **Bolster deterrence against Russian actions short of war by strengthening resilience and through more assertive and punitive counteractions.** NATO and NATO member states’ failure to respond robustly to Russia’s hybrid warfare—whether it is information warfare, cyberattacks, sabotage, assassinations, or other forms of aggression — has resulted in Russia’s intensification and escalation of these actions. The transatlantic community must strengthen its resilience against such attacks but also take stronger punitive measures against Russia if it is to persuade Russia to cease these attacks. While much of what needs to be done falls beyond the remit of NATO’s military capabilities, greater consideration should be given to how military assets can be leveraged to gather intelligence about Russian activity and provide a military dimension to the transatlantic community’s response to such provocations. For example, when a Russian ship fired a warning shot directed at a commercial Norwegian fishing boat within Norway’s exclusive economic zone or when Russia pulled out Estonian navigation buoys from the Narva River,²³ an immediate show of force from NATO could have been an appropriate response.
- **Strengthen the deterrence and resilience capacities of non-NATO nations in Europe and Russia’s periphery.** Recent elections in Georgia, Moldova, and Romania reflect the intensity of Russia’s determination to claw back control and influence over the space of the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact. A key priority of a Russia

22. For an excellent proposal for a Nordic-led Arctic joint expeditionary force, see Ryan R. Duffy et al., “More NATO in the Arctic Could Free the United States Up to Focus on China,” *War on the Rocks*, November 21, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/11/more-nato-in-the-arctic-could-free-the-united-states-up-to-focus-on-china/>.

23. See Seb Starcevic, “Russian Warship Fired Warning Shot at Norwegian Fishing Boat,” *Politico*, September 24, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-warship-chase-away-norway-fishing-vessel/>; and George Wright, “Russia Removal of Border Markers ‘Unacceptable’ – EU,” *BBC*, May 24, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c899844ypj2o>.

strategy should be to strengthen efforts by the Alliance, its member states, and key institutional partners, such as the European Union, to reinforce the resilience and defense capabilities of non-NATO nations in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. NATO's programs, such as the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative, warrant even greater emphasis and resources, particularly in those regions.

- **Intensify Russia's economic and diplomatic isolation.** The current set of measures taken against Moscow in these realms have failed to sufficiently degrade Russia's war economy and its ability to sustain its invasion of Ukraine and provocations elsewhere in the world. A key priority for NATO and its member states should be to significantly escalate economic sanctions, including the exercise of secondary sanctions to eliminate Moscow's ability to generate international revenue from energy exports and attain critical technologies needed by its defense industrial sector.
- **Increase efforts to generate internal Russian opposition to the Kremlin's revanchist objectives and greater support for democratic principles and governance.** Russia has undertaken aggressive campaigns to influence the politics of NATO allies and partners. In the recent elections of Moldova and Romania, Russian intervention nearly effectuated regime change. For too long, the transatlantic community has remained on the defensive in this realm. NATO and its member states need to shift to the offensive and weaponize the power of truth to illuminate the brutal realities of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, the corruption of Russian officials, and other realities of Russian governance. NATO allies must more actively support Russian stakeholders—particularly civil society—that are more aligned with transatlantic values. This is critical to degrading the political will of the Russian state to continue its aggressions.
- **Modulate dialogue with Russia, limiting it to what is operationally necessary.** The Alliance should formally disband the NATO-Russia Council—which last met in 2022—until Moscow has demonstrated genuine commitment to a constructive relationship. Nonetheless, the Alliance should establish and/or maintain lines of communication between the NATO secretary general and the Kremlin, as well as between Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and the Russian General Staff, to enable crisis management and provide transparency needed for military stability. This would not preclude NATO allies from dialogues with Russia deemed necessary, for example, to assist Ukraine or pursue arms control measures.

The bottom line

As noted, NATO possesses an overmatching capacity to defeat Russia in Ukraine, deter Russian aggression, contain Russian influence beyond its borders, and degrade Russia's ability and will to accomplish its revisionist agenda. Today, there is no better time to achieve these objectives by fully marshaling the Alliance's assets and potential. Moscow cannot undertake an all-out military attack on NATO without risking the viability of Russia's armed forces and thus its regime. The accomplishment of these objectives would provide stability to Europe's eastern frontier and establish the best foundation for an eventual relationship with Moscow that is minimally confrontational, if not cooperative and constructive.

However, this will take political will and resources. Russia today is determined to prevail in Ukraine, expand its military capabilities, and further leverage its partners, particularly China, Iran, and North Korea, to defeat the community of democracies and, particularly, the Alliance. Russia already envisions itself as being at war with NATO.

Moreover, there is real urgency in implementing a Russia strategy. When it comes to supporting Ukraine, as Biegun bluntly warns, “allied nations will not have the political stamina to indefinitely finance a war effort that seems designed simply to prevent the Ukrainians from losing and that appears fearful of allowing the Ukrainians to win.”²⁴

A defeat of Ukraine—which would be a defeat for the Alliance—would significantly increase the risk of wider war and severely damage the credibility and unity of NATO. That would make all the other objectives of a Russia strategy much harder to achieve. The Alliance has more than enough means to achieve all those objectives, but it cannot assume that opportunity will last. When it comes to Russia, NATO must act decisively, and NATO must act now.

24. Biegun, “The Path Forward.”

About the center

The **Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security** works to develop sustainable, nonpartisan strategies to address the most important security challenges facing the United States and the world. The Center honors General Brent Scowcroft's legacy of service and embodies his ethos of nonpartisan commitment to the cause of security, support for US leadership in cooperation with allies and partners, and dedication to the mentorship of the next generation of leaders.

The Scowcroft Center's **Transatlantic Security Initiative** brings together top policymakers, government and military officials, business leaders, and senior experts from Europe and North America to share insights and develop innovative approaches to the key challenges facing NATO and the transatlantic community.

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This report is intended to live up to General Brent Scowcroft's standard for rigorous, relevant, and nonpartisan analysis on national security issues. The Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security works to continue his nonpartisan commitment to the cause of security, support for US leadership in cooperation with allies and partners, and dedication to the mentorship of the next generation of leaders.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Atlantic Council.

■ Outline: A NATO Strategy for Russia

Enduring realities

- Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a failure of deterrence.
- Russia is at war, not just against Ukraine. It is also at war against NATO.
- NATO faces long-term conflict with Russia.
- Russia will continue efforts to increase the size and capability of its armed forces.
- Moscow's aggressive actions short of war will continue and escalate.
- Moscow's exercise of nuclear coercion will continue as a key element of Russia's strategy and should be expected to intensify.
- Moscow is conducting a global campaign of aggression to weaken the democratic community of nations and the rules-based international order.
- An effective Russia strategy will require a coordinated leveraging of all the instruments of power available through the Alliance, its member states, and its key partners, including the European Union.
- NATO significantly overmatches Russia in military and economic power.

Core objectives

- Defeat Russia in Ukraine.
- Deter aggression by Russia.
- Contain Russia's influence and control.
- Degrade Russia's capabilities and determination.

Recommended actions

- Defeat Russia in Ukraine and accelerate Ukraine's accession into the NATO alliance.
- Fulfill and operationalize NATO's regional defense plans.
- Build and deploy the requisite national forces.
- Strengthen transatlantic defense industrial capacity.
- Increase allied defense spending to the equivalent of 5 percent of GDP.
- Terminate the NATO Russia Founding Act (NRFA), including ending NATO's commitment to the "three nuclear no's" and its commitment not to permanently station "substantial combat forces" in new member states.
- Update NATO's nuclear force posture.
- Increase the spectrum of NATO's nuclear capabilities.
- Expand the number of members participating in the Alliance's nuclear sharing agreements.
- Broaden the number and locations of infrastructure capable of hosting the Alliance's nuclear posture.
- Reinforce NATO's eastern flank.
- Establish a more robust permanent military presence along NATO's eastern frontier.
- Conduct large-scale, concentrated exercises on NATO's eastern flank.
- Upgrade the Alliance's air defense (AD) and ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems to more robustly address Russian threats.
- Expand NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe's (SACEUR) authority to order deployments and conduct operations along NATO's eastern frontier.
- Augment the Alliance's posture in the Arctic.
- Develop a comprehensive NATO strategy to defend its interests in the High North.
- Establish a NATO Arctic Command and Joint Force.
- Bolster deterrence against Russian actions short of war by strengthening resilience and through more assertive and punitive counteractions.
- Strengthen the deterrence and resilience capacities of non-NATO nations in Europe and Russia's periphery.
- Intensify Russia's economic and diplomatic isolation.
- Increase efforts to generate internal Russian opposition to the Kremlin's revanchist objectives and greater support for democratic principles and governance.
- Modulate dialogue with Russia, limiting it to what is operationally necessary.