

Historic underinvestment and recent geopolitical changes have resulted in gaps in European NATO militaries, which undermine deterrence against Russia, according to a new think tank Report

- European NATO faces a number of gaps across air, sea and land capabilities, some severe and some acute
- Britain should move towards a force which is both integrated and focused to achieve the most efficient boost to European NATO defence against Russia
- Paper recommends armed forces integration, greater focus on air and naval power, and exploration of a UK-built sub-strategic nuclear missile to bolster collective defence

A new report from the Council on Geostrategy's Strategic Defence Unit finds that underinvestment and geopolitical changes have left the UK and other European NATO countries with serious gaps, particularly in the air and at sea, which Russia could exploit and attack if it wished.

The new analysis shows how the next decade will see the defence of the Euro-Atlantic region undergo a period of transition, faced with a Russian economy partially mobilised for war, a Chinese state ramping up its military and American priorities shifting to the Indo-Pacific region. Combining these with a prolonged period of underinvestment in defence, European NATO countries face a number of military gaps, which undermine deterrence if left unresolved.

These gaps notably include a limited ability to destroy or suppress Russian missile defences, due to low numbers of the required missiles for this role. The gaps also encompass insufficient dedicated missile defences; although by the early 2030s there should be 160 operational missile batteries (a mix of systems such as launchers and radar systems), around 50% of these are on order and yet to be deployed. Even with these welcome orders in place, missile production rates will struggle to keep up with growing demand, and there remain outstanding gaps in sufficient counter-drone defences, as well as ballistic and hypersonic missile defences.

Related to these are the challenges around contested logistics, with many European NATO countries lacking in lift capacity across domains. For example, a lack of trusted crews means many rely on impromptu contracting of civil sealift, which could prove unreliable in a conflict.

There are also limited systems in these countries capable of countering Russian submarine warfare, with Russia's growing and modernising nuclear-powered submarines threatening NATO with potent attacks from unpredictable angles, and a lack of sub-strategic nuclear options reducing NATO's capacity for manoeuvre in any escalation. There are further gaps identified in capacity, supply chain resilience and technical expertise within the broader NATO industrial base, with missile production highlighted as a key concern.

While the paper clearly pinpoints these existing capability gaps, it argues for allies to address how they will reduce the risk of duplicative efforts which leave gaps unfilled. It calls for these gaps to be refined further to provide a clear outline of what NATO countries should focus on, and which allies are best placed to focus on closing a specific capability gap.

For the UK, the next step is assessing how it can best address these gaps alongside its European NATO allies. The analysis recommends that HM Government should concentrate on:

- Prioritising integration across the British Armed Forces;
- Shifting to a more focused force with greater emphasis on air and naval power;
- Focusing homeland defence on cost-efficient measures, such as the recent cadet force funding increase relative to costlier measures such as conscription;
- Rebuilding the British sub-strategic arsenal with exploration of a UK-built sub-strategic missile; and
- Expanding missile production capacity in the UK for in-demand missiles.

Gen. (rtd.) Sir Richard Barrons KCB CBE, Senior Consulting Fellow at Chatham House and co-author of the Strategic Defence Review 2025, said in the foreword:

‘This Report describes very clearly where the gaps are in European military capability compared to Russia today. It shows what needs to be done and where military transformation should focus.’

‘We know what needs to be done. What is left is to decide to do it at the speed determined by the risks.’

‘Relying on the largesse of friends and the forbearance of enemies to continue to spend most of our money on ourselves for the next decade substitutes hope and denial for competent, coherent strategy.’

William Freer, Research Fellow (National Security) at the Council on Geostrategy, said:

‘This new Report aims to paint a picture of European NATO and its current capabilities stacked against a Russian military capable of posing problem sets to NATO that could challenge the foundations of the alliance which have existed since its inception.’

‘If the fighting in Ukraine were to end, the Kremlin would, in relatively quick order, have a potent mix of capabilities at its disposal, consisting of a large infantry-based army, supported by a deep and replaceable long-range fires magazine, shielded by its A2/AD systems and backed by a powerful nuclear arsenal.’

‘In contrast, the UK and other European NATO countries face the legacy of decades of underinvestment alongside geopolitical changes. Take European NATO navies, for instance, with less than half having been commissioned in the last 15 years, and even fewer being built with sensor suites, Combat Management Systems and armaments designed to fight peer adversaries. It is remarkable that not a single European navy possesses a Ballistic Missile Defence-capable warship.’

‘After too many years of foot dragging, investment in defence across European NATO is now on the rise. This is to be applauded, but gaps remain. It is vital that deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic continues to hold. Maximising the impact of the new defence spending across NATO will be of growing importance to ensure it endures.’

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Notes to editors:

1. The Council on Geostrategy was launched on 2nd March 2021. More information can be found on our [website](#), including our [mission statement](#).
2. The Council on Geostrategy has an [Advisory Board](#) of 16 individuals with experience in politics, the military, diplomacy and academia.

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