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NATO's extended frontline

Towards subregional strongholds and aggregated deterrence

Matti Pesu, Iro Särkkä & Joel Linnainmäki

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Summary

- The NATO–Russia frontline has become the strategic fault line in Euro-Atlantic security. The frontline states' exposure to hostile Russian activities makes them more vulnerable to Russian provocations and outright military aggression than the rest of the alliance.
- NATO's new frontline consists of three subregions: the European Arctic, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea. While each region has its own distinct dynamics, they all face the threat of potential Russian aggression and heightened risks of spillover from the war in Ukraine.
- Russia's interests, resources, and objectives vary across the subregions. However, Russian military dominance or aggression in one area would affect the security of other frontline states and alter the strategic dynamics along the entire frontline and beyond.
- The relationship between exposed frontline states and better-protected allies in the alliance's rear area is highly significant for NATO's internal dynamics. The commitment and contributions of the better-protected allies are essential when it comes to turning the exposed frontline into an advantage for the alliance.
- NATO should seize the current momentum by imposing severe strategic dilemmas on Russia in each subregion and by generating frontline-wide "aggregated deterrence" based on strong subregional deterrence and defence postures.

Authors

Matti Pesu
Senior Research Fellow
Finnish Foreign Policy, Northern European Security and NATO
FIIA

Iro Särkkä
Senior Research Fellow
Finnish Foreign Policy, Northern European Security and NATO
FIIA

Joel Linnainmäki
Research Fellow
Finnish Foreign Policy, Northern European Security and NATO
FIIA

Introduction

The concepts of "frontline" and "frontline states" have re-emerged in Western strategic debates to describe those NATO allies most exposed to Russia's coercion and aggression, as well as the newly extended fault line stretching from Northern to Southeastern Europe, where the borders of NATO and Russia meet.[1] Yet despite the frequent use of these terms, little attention has been paid to what actually defines this frontline or to the role it plays in Euro-Atlantic security.

This Briefing Paper analyses how the NATO–Russia frontline shapes contemporary Euro-Atlantic security. It approaches the frontline – and, by extension, the frontline states – as a defining geopolitical reality vital to European security and NATO's mission of collective defence and deterrence.[2] The paper seeks to refine the concept and assess its role within the broader framework of Euro-Atlantic security, and to articulate a guiding logic for NATO's evolving deterrence and defence strategy.

The paper proceeds in three parts. First, it examines the role of the NATO–Russia frontline within the alliance and the wider Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Second, it analyses the frontline's three subregions – the European Arctic, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea – assessing their strategic importance and NATO's deterrence and defence activities across these interconnected areas. Third, it outlines how the vulnerabilities of NATO's extended frontline can be turned into an advantage through an interconnected yet regionally tailored stronghold approach designed to generate what this paper terms "aggregated deterrence". Achieving this requires NATO to strengthen its emerging deterrence and defence posture, clarify the division of labour among allies, and deepen multinational cooperation within the three strongholds.

The frontline and Euro-Atlantic security: NATO's first line of defence

There are several ways to define what constitutes a frontline. A narrow interpretation focuses on the land areas where the borders of NATO allies and Russia meet. Following Finland's accession to NATO in 2023, the alliance now faces an extended direct frontline with Russia, spanning approximately 2,600 kilometres. A broader understanding, however, conceives the frontline as a layered zone of strategically exposed areas in Russia's vicinity. At its core are the nations that share a land or maritime border with Russia, forming the immediate line of contact in any potential conflict. Surrounding these are the adjacent support and rear areas that provide strategic depth to NATO's defence posture, as well as other exposed territories or waters near the physical frontline that would likely play a crucial role in a potential crisis or confrontation.[3]

1 See e.g. Ålander, Minna (2025) "Front-Line States Prepare to Fight Alone". *Foreign Policy*, 23 June 2025. https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/06/23/nato-frontier-countries-estonia-finland-lithuania-poland-hybrid-warfare-russia/; Milne, Richard and Henry Foy (2014) "Nato frontline states see fears over Russia realized". *Financial Times*, 31 August 2014. https://www.ft.com/content/13f822e4-30f4-11e4-b2fd-00144feabdc0.

2 Frontline nations can also be understood as an interest group within NATO's decision-making and, interrelatedly, as a category of allies with a distinctive, Russia-dominated perception of European security.

3 Mazurkiewicz, Agata and Wojciech Michnik (2023) "Towards the Frontline States Concept". PeaceRep, 27 April 2023. https://peacerep.org/publication/towards-the-frontline-states-concept/; Michnik, Wojciech (2024) "Nordic Frontline States? How Finland and Sweden impact NATO's security". PeaceRep, 5 April 2024. https://peacerep.org/publication/nordic-frontline-states-how-finland-and-sweden-impact-natos-security/.

Although Russia has the capability to threaten any NATO member through grey-zone operations, long-range conventional strikes, and ultimately nuclear weapons, the logic of territoriality continues to dominate military and security realities. In other words, the nations along NATO's layered frontline zone remain more vulnerable to Russian coercion, provocation and potential aggression than better-protected allies. Collectively, this zone constitutes the main arena for NATO's deterrence and defence activities in Europe, reflected in measures such as the deployment of NATO's forward land forces and activities like Baltic Sentry and Eastern Sentry, air policing and other collective peacetime missions. Recent incidents, including drone incursions, airspace violations and instrumentalised migration, have further demonstrated the frontline's vulnerability to Russian coercion attempts and strategic probing.

The security of the frontline zone is not only vital in and of itself, but also a critical prerequisite for a stable Euro-Atlantic area. The layered zone serves as an effective buffer between Russia and the more protected parts of NATO, blunting potential Russian military incursion or encroachment deeper into the Euro-Atlantic region and absorbing most of Russia's malign activities. In essence, Euro-Atlantic security begins – and would ultimately be defended or lost – on NATO's frontline.

"Euro-Atlantic security begins – and would ultimately be defended or lost – on NATO's frontline."

This reality has two implications. First, the exposed frontline states must make substantial investments in their national defence to ensure their own security and to set an example for their allies in the spirit of Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty. They should not be viewed primarily as consumers or demandeurs of allied resources, but as central actors bearing a large part of the burden for Euro-Atlantic security. This is particularly true of frontline allies with notable defence potential, such as Poland, Finland, and Romania. Second, the less exposed allies also have a direct stake in ensuring that the frontline holds. This requires them to continue providing the capabilities that sustain NATO's collective defence along the frontline, including logistical support and forward deployments, enabled by host-nation support from frontline states.

The frontline states also compete for attention, reassurance, and resources from the more protected allies, particularly NATO's major powers. The United States is the clearest example, with its presence and resources seen as an invaluable deterrent. This logic applies to other allies too; the United Kingdom's strong presence in Estonia and France's in Romania limits their ability to engage elsewhere along the frontline. The interaction between exposed frontline and protected rear-area allies has become a defining feature of NATO's internal dynamics, shaping how the alliance organises and conducts its collective defence. This was evident in autumn 2025, when both Poland and Estonia invoked Article 4 in response to Russian border incursions, aiming to secure a stronger allied presence and to draw attention to their security concerns.

The three critical subregions: The European Arctic, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea

Rather than approaching the frontline on a state-by-state basis, this paper argues that it should first and foremost be assessed through the lens of subregions. In essence, the defence of NATO's extended frontline ultimately focuses on securing three critical subregions: the European Arctic, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. In each of these areas, NATO faces a long-term threat from an increasingly assertive Russia intent on revising the European security architecture. Both NATO and Russia have significant yet conflicting interests in these regions, making them potential flashpoints for European – and, more broadly, international – security. The map in Figure 1 portrays the layered frontline and the three critical subregions.

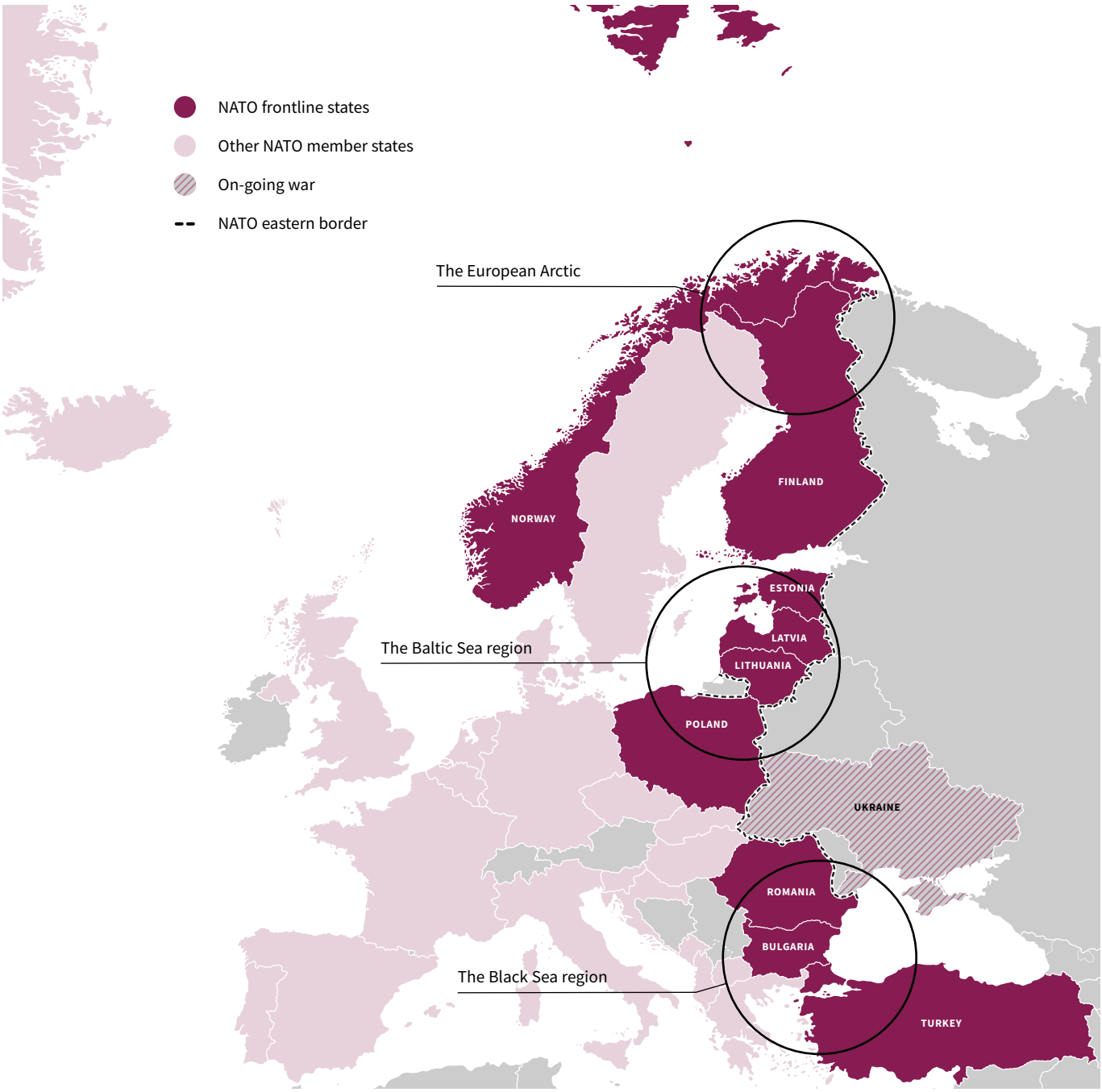

Figure 1. A map of the NATO frontline and the three critical subregions.

The *European Arctic* is shaped by Russia's strategic interest in safeguarding its nuclear second-strike capability, concentrated in the Northern Fleet's sea-based bastion – a heavily defended area designed to protect Russia's ballistic missile submarines – and related infrastructure on the Kola Peninsula. The region is Russia's only open maritime access point in Europe not surrounded by NATO allies. Furthermore, it is economically essential for Russia due to energy and mineral resources and the Northern Sea Route's growing potential as a faster and cheaper shipping route between Asia and Europe.

From a military-strategic perspective, Russia's sea-based bastion defence approach centres on pushing its defensive perimeter outward to ensure freedom of operation. Russia could seek to control the vast maritime areas between the Svalbard islands and Norway, up towards the Greenland–Iceland–UK (GIUK) gap, which is crucial for NATO's supply and communication lines. For these reasons, Russia also views the region as increasingly important for

projecting power into the North Atlantic.[4] Moreover, it is developing infrastructure to enable a potential long-term build-up of land forces in Northern Europe once the war in Ukraine concludes.[5]

Conversely, for NATO, the European Arctic's land and maritime areas are closely linked with the defence of Northern Atlantic sealines. In the event of a full-scale conflict, potential US reinforcements and materiel would flow into Europe across the North Atlantic, directed towards ports and airbases in countries such as the United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Since NATO was founded, Norway has served as one of the two northernmost allies alongside Denmark. However, with the accession of Sweden and Finland, this dynamic has changed. The Nordic countries are now working more closely together to align their defence forces with NATO's regional defence plans,[6] and using the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) as a tool to implement collective defence. NATO is also in the process of establishing Forward Land Forces (FLF) in Finnish Lapland, with Sweden acting as the Framework Nation.[7]

In the *Baltic Sea region*, Russia's interests include defending St. Petersburg and preventing a potential attack along the historical invasion corridor from continental Europe towards Moscow. Moreover, access to the Baltic Sea is vital for Russia's economy and its security of supply, including the export of oil. In recent years, Russia has expanded its nuclear infrastructure in Kaliningrad and deployed nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil, which it also used as a staging ground for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. From Kaliningrad, Russia can project military power deep into the Baltic Sea, complicating NATO's access and reinforcement routes and allowing Moscow to threaten supply lines to the Baltic states, including via the Suwałki Gap. However, Kaliningrad is also a defensive liability for Russia: an isolated exclave surrounded by NATO territory and highly vulnerable to blockade or precision strikes in a major conflict.

"From the perspective of the alliance, the Baltic Sea region forms the primary axis of potential Russian military pressure against the frontline."

From the perspective of the alliance, the Baltic Sea region forms the primary axis of potential Russian military pressure against the frontline. One key challenge for NATO is how to defend its vulnerable frontline, characterised by exposed maritime supply lines and limited room to absorb or delay an attack. This is particularly the case for so-called *fait accompli* scenarios, where Russia would seek to use temporary local or regional military advantage to deny NATO the ability to respond or to escalate. However, NATO's challenges in defending the region have been somewhat mitigated by Finland's and Sweden's accession and by the gradual introduction of allied forward defence and deterrence-by-denial capabilities in the region.[8] Furthermore, the recent Baltic Sentry and Eastern Sentry military activities are part of the alliance's peacetime vigilance, intended to complicate the adversary's calculations for such operations.

For NATO allies, the importance of the Baltic Sea extends well beyond military considerations. It is vital to the economies and security of supply of the Baltic states and Finland – for instance, over 90 per cent of Finland's trade passes through the Baltic Sea. The seabed also hosts critical infrastructure essential to economic stability and energy security in Northern Europe, including data and electricity cables and gas pipelines that connect the Nordic-Baltic allies to one another and to Central Europe.

4 See e.g. Mikkola, Harri (2019) "The Geostrategic Arctic: Hard security in the High North". *FIIA Briefing Paper* 259, April 2019. The Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA). https://fiia.fi/en/publication/the-geostrategic-arctic.

5 Kukkola, Juha (2024) "The Leningrad Military District: The past and future of the Northwestern direction". National Defence University Department of Warfare Series 2: *Research Reports* No. 35. https://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/190009.

6 Särkkä, Iro, Minna Ålander, Joel Linnainmäki and Antti Pihlajamaa (2024). Finland's partnerships as a NATO member: Prospects for defence cooperation in a multilateral framework. *FIIA Report 76*, Finnish Institute of International Affairs. https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/finlands-partnerships-as-a-nato-member.

7 Ministry of Defence of Finland (2025) "Statement regarding NATO's Forward Land Forces in Finland". Press Release 25 June 2025. https://defmin.fi/en/-/statement-regarding-nato-s-forward-land-forces-in-finland#13392117.

8 Frisell, Eva and Jakob Gustafsson (2025) A New Generation of Forward Defence: NATO in the Baltic states. *Report* FOI-R--5765-SE, June 2025, FOI. https://foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI-R--5765--SE.

Finally, the *Black Sea region* is a dynamic and fluid theatre, whose future is closely tied to the outcome of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. The region is significant for both Russia and NATO, serving as a crossroads linking the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe with the Middle East, and the Mediterranean with the Caucasus. It has already witnessed three major conflicts involving Russia: the 2008 war against Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. NATO allies in the region – particularly Romania – face risks of spillover, including airspace violations by Russian drones targeting Ukraine. While a direct land invasion against NATO members remains unlikely, NATO's partner countries, such as Moldova, are more vulnerable, particularly to hybrid warfare and hostile subversion. The alliance's priorities in the region include safeguarding maritime freedom of navigation and preventing Russia from achieving its objectives in Ukraine. A Russian victory there would be a serious setback for NATO, potentially enabling Moscow to reposition its forces closer to the alliance's borders in the region.

To conclude, while each of these subregions has its own distinctive security logic and operational dynamics, they are inherently interconnected.[9] Escalation or instability in one area could rapidly spill over into another, underscoring the need for a coherent, coordinated, and regionally tailored NATO strategy across the entire frontline. Moreover, the interdependence of these subregions creates a strong incentive for frontline states to deepen coordination and cooperation in their defence and deterrence efforts, building on their shared threat perceptions and converging strategic outlooks.

Turning the exposed frontline into an advantage

For NATO, defending the extended frontline requires regionally tailored approaches reflecting the distinct security environments of the European Arctic, Baltic Sea, and Black Sea regions. This regionalised outlook is beginning to take shape within the alliance's defence planning and deterrence posture, although these military-level developments have yet to be clearly articulated at the political level.[10] The most notable examples include the establishment of regionally focused Joint Force Commands (JFCs) and the introduction of three Regional Plans, each administered by a JFC and centred on one of the key subregions. This development will inevitably increase the regionalisation of NATO's activities, which needs to be reconciled with maintaining alliance cohesion.

At the same time, the long and exposed frontline also presents potential liabilities for NATO. Its forces are spread across vast and geographically diverse areas, often operating with limited strategic depth and complex, insufficient logistical networks. Unlike during the Cold War, when the alliance confronted a single, clearly defined main front in Central Europe, NATO's present 360-degree approach requires the alliance to deter and defend against multiple threats in various domains and operational theatres. The distinct conditions and vulnerabilities of each subregion may hinder rapid reinforcement and undermine NATO's ability to sustain deterrence across the entire frontline.

The frontline may also be vulnerable to Russian wedge strategies designed to divide, weaken, or isolate NATO allies. By forcing the alliance to stretch its limited capabilities and resources, Russia could exploit vulnerabilities across the frontline – a risk that could be further aggravated if some parts along the frontline prove weaker than others. Russia could, for example, compel the alliance to respond simultaneously to acute threats and hybrid or military activities at multiple points along the frontline, such as snap exercises, large-scale airspace violations, or the targeting of allied infrastructure near the border. While the alliance is preoccupied with such crises,

9 Åtland, Kristian and Ihor Kabanenko (2019) "Russia and its Western Neighbours: A Comparative Study of the Security Situation in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea Regions". *Europe-Asia Studies*, 72(2), 286–313. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1690634.

10 On the evolution of NATO's collective defence approach, see Perot, Elie (2025) "The return to collective defence: navigating the politics of allied war planning within NATO". *International Affairs*, 110 (6): 2129–2147. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaf188.

Russia could then seek to exploit temporary military advantages elsewhere to pursue limited objectives.

To mitigate these challenges, NATO must fully embrace its nascent regionalised approach to deterrence and defence. Central to this strategy should be building *"regional strongholds"* in the three subregions. These strongholds would concentrate increased military power in the frontline zone, accompanied by substantial forward presence by more protected allies. In practice, this means solidifying the FLF missions in the Baltic states, Poland, Romania, and Finland with combat-ready forces and making the missions capable of denying an attack from Russia. Temporary activities, such as Baltic Sentry and Eastern Sentry, should be transformed into a more permanent posture.

The strongholds should be underpinned by up-to-date regional defence plans, effective command and control (C2) structures, appropriate rules of engagement, and the capability to rapidly reinforce subregional theatres across all domains with high-readiness forces from NATO's more protected areas. These arrangements must be complemented by secure and efficient military mobility corridors from the rear areas, linking NATO's strategic depth to the layered frontline, and by regular large-scale exercises throughout allied territory. The alliance might also consider extending its nuclear sharing or dispersal options into the outer zones of the frontline. This would, however, require significant changes to NATO's present nuclear doctrine, policy and planning, as well as a major shift in key allies' nuclear policy positions.

Beyond consolidating its current efforts, NATO should further adjust its strategic outlook by establishing an effective division of labour among its European NATO allies.[11] Each ally should have clear regional responsibilities and roles with respect to a specific stronghold, determined by factors such as geographic location and existing capabilities. NATO's defence planning process should assign capability targets to allies based on their roles, which would also strengthen Europe's ability to take primary responsibility for the continent's conventional defence. Such a role-based system would be the most effective way to make use of Europe's dispersed capabilities, while granting the United States greater flexibility to support European defence where and when it is most needed. Lastly, NATO should encourage stronger allied cooperation within each stronghold to enhance first-response capacity and maximise the effectiveness of collective defence.

The overarching purpose of the stronghold approach is to impose strategic dilemmas on Russia by compelling it to disperse its military assets across multiple theatres. This is imperative, as considerable uncertainty remains regarding Russia's capacity to rebuild its military power and to take hostile actions against NATO after the war in Ukraine ends. The alliance can manipulate Russia's intentions through credible deterrence and defence measures, while simultaneously forcing Russia to stretch its resources by building robust strongholds along the frontline. This logic also implies that, should Moscow choose to test NATO's resolve or initiate aggression in one subregion, the alliance must be prepared to respond and, if necessary, to escalate defensively in others. This would require substantial solidarity and commitment from all allies.

"NATO can turn the challenge of an extended and exposed frontline into a collective advantage that reinforces stability and enhances deterrence across the Euro-Atlantic space."

Ultimately, through coordinated subregional efforts and credible deterrence and defence postures along the critical sections of the frontline, NATO can generate an *aggregated deterrence* effect, where the combined strength of regionally tailored defences, the capability to rapidly reinforce, and readiness to escalate dissuades Russia from acting anywhere along the frontline. In doing so, NATO can turn the challenge of an extended and exposed frontline into a collective advantage that reinforces stability and enhances deterrence across the Euro-Atlantic space.

11 Pesu, Matti (2023) "NATO in the North: The emerging division of labour in Northern European security". *FIIA Briefing Paper* 370, September 2023. The Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA). https://fiia.fi/en/publication/nato-in-the-north.

Conclusions

This paper has proposed a regionalised approach centred on building allied strongholds in three critical subregions of NATO's extended frontline. The alliance is already moving towards a more regional outlook, although this logic has not yet been clearly articulated at the political level. This is the right trajectory and should be reinforced. Furthermore, NATO should not hesitate to adopt a role-based division of labour in defending these strongholds and to promote deeper military cooperation and integration within them.

Adopting the proposed approach would require strong political leadership, skilled strategic communications, and sustained allied commitment – including stable defence spending – given the long timelines associated with capability development and improvements in military mobility. It would also undoubtedly test the cohesion of NATO's 32 allies. Yet, in the current Euro-Atlantic security environment and in light of Russia's continued revisionist ambitions, it is the political level of the alliance that must, first and foremost, adapt to military-strategic realities.

The political momentum and strategic window of opportunity to have these complex and difficult discussions within the alliance is now, while allies are focused on the Russia threat and Russia is militarily tied up in its war in Ukraine. In this regard, three considerations are crucial. First, establishing a credible strategy to defend the exposed frontline strengthens the security of all allies, as it blunts Russia's potential encroachment deeper into the transatlantic space. Contributing to this task is both achievable and reasonable for all members. Second, NATO should actively encourage more intensive cooperation among like-minded allies within each stronghold in alignment with NATO's planning and collective defence. Much of this collaboration can take place outside formal structures. Finally, to sustain political cohesion, the alliance should also support regional approaches to non-Russia-related security challenges among concerned allies, while ensuring that these efforts are supported and, if practical, complemented by those primarily focused on Russia and deterrence.

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FIIA
FINNISH
INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

Arkadiankatu 23 b
POB 425 / 00101 Helsinki
Telephone +358 (0)9 432 7799
www.fiia.fi