

NATO Activates Response Force For The First Time

WRITTEN BY OLYMPIA ILIOPOULOU

Image credits: <https://unsplash.com/photos/njI8WAqpn7Y>



Recently, NATO activated the Alliance's Response Force (NRF) for collective defence and deterrence for the first time. This measure comes as a response to "Russia's massive military build-up" says NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg. As Russia pushes deeper into Ukraine, units of the NRF, led by France, have already arrived in Romania and remain on high alert.

1. What is NATO's Response Force?

The NRF is a multinational force comprising 40,000 land, sea, air, and special operation troops, including those from non-allied countries such as Finland and Sweden (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2022d). It is based on a rotational system where allies commit their units for a period of 12 months and is considered central to NATO's military transformation and interoperability (Barry, 2012).

The NRF was created in 2002 to be a rapidly deployable unit that could provide immediate assistance to any emerging crisis. Since then, NATO has modified the NRF concept three times, adapting to its changing security environment (Ringsmose & Rynning, 2017). At first, the NRF was intended to facilitate operations on non-allied territory, while today it has been linked to collective defence and Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Furthermore, it is now more preoccupied with providing military responses rather than crisis management. The last modification was made in 2014, responding to Russia's first attacks against Ukraine, and has ever since been focused on Eastern Europe (Ringsmose & Rynning, 2017). The NRF was then doubled in size and reinforced with special units, creating the "enhanced" form with which it is known today. The enhanced NRF consists of four main parts: a Command and Control element; the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJFT); the Initial Follow-On Forces Group (IFFG) and the Response Forces Pool.

It is worth noting that the NRF had long been considered a "failure". The main argument was that "it did not become the operational tool envisioned by the allies in 2002" (Ringsmose & Rynning, 2017, p. 444). More specifically, the principal reasons behind its "failure" were located in the shortcomings of the allied countries, especially the European ones, firstly, in supplying sufficient military forces and, secondly, in reaching a consensus that would give authorisation for the use of the force (Barry, 2012; Ringsmose & Rynning, 2017). That explains why it had never been deployed for defence or deterrence before but only for protection (2004 Summer Olympics in Greece; Afghan presidential elections), disaster relief (2005 Hurricane Katrina; the earthquake in Pakistan), and non-combat evacuation operations (2021 evacuation from Afghanistan). Hence, the decision to activate the NRF now is all the more important as it shows that the Alliance has overcome its chronic constraints and is moving forward more unified than ever.

2. Why is it being activated now?

Considering that Ukraine is not a member country of NATO, it cannot be covered by the security guarantee of the Washington Treaty. Hence, NATO is not deploying its troops directly to Ukraine but instead placing them in strategic positions around the country to reinforce its Eastern presence.

The NRF serves a double role. On the one hand, it ensures readiness, and on the other hand, it offers reassurance to the Eastern allied countries that are feeling nervous over Moscow's aggressiveness. NATO's strong commitment to guaranteeing its allies' safety is well known. In a recent press conference, Stoltenberg was adamant about it "Make no mistake; we will defend and protect every ally against any attack and every inch of NATO territory". He continued, "And that's the reason also we have increased our presence in the eastern part of the alliance with thousands of more troops, ships and planes over the last weeks to send a very clear message; an attack on one ally will trigger the response of the whole Alliance."

In the same vein, "These deterrence measures are prudent and enhance our speed, responsiveness and capability to shield and protect the one billion citizens we swore to protect," said in a statement NATO Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Tod Wolters.

3. Overview of deployments

The exact number of troops that are being deployed following the activation of the NRF remains unspecified. However, Stoltenberg emphasised the Alliance's intention to further increase its presence in the Eastern flank whenever needed.

Currently, in addition to the NRF units that have already arrived in Romania, NATO has enhanced its forward presence in the East with four battalion-sized battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Of course, these deployments are supported and complemented by allied and especially US troops. The US has several bases in Lithuania, Poland, and Romania, and the Pentagon has also ordered the urgent deployment of over 10,000 additional troops in Europe. Moreover, it has been reported that because of the situation in Ukraine, the Pentagon is considering the establishment of permanent US troops in the Eastern part of the Alliance.

4. The beginning of a new era?

Although it is difficult to say how the situation will evolve, the activation of the NRF as a collective defence tool, for the first time in its existence, sends a clear message that NATO is not taking any chances with the security of the Alliance. Furthermore, it shows that NATO is not a rigid organisation but rather constantly evolves by adapting to the rapidly changing security environment. This activation may be introducing a new era of increased, more efficient, and rapid transatlantic cooperation. After all, as the history of the NRF can attest, if anyone can trigger such a change to the Alliance, it is Russia.

Bibliography

Barry, C. (2012). Building Future Transatlantic Interoperability Around a Robust NATO Response Force. National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Washington.

Gould, J. (2022, March 1). Pentagon revisiting long-term US troop levels in Eastern Europe. Defense News. <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2022/03/01/pentagon-revisiting-long-term-us-troop-levels-in-eastern-europe/>

North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2022a, February 24). Press briefing by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following an extraordinary meeting of the North Atlantic Council. NATO. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_192408.htm

North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2022b, February 25). Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the extraordinary virtual summit of NATO Heads of State and Government. NATO. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_192455.htm

North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2022c, February 28). Boosting NATO's presence in the east and southeast. NATO. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm

North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2022d, February 28). NATO Response Force. NATO. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49755.htm

North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2022e, March 2). NATO Response Force units arrive in Romania. NATO. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_192695.htm?selectedLocale=en

Bibliography

Picheta, R., & Pettersson, H. (2022, February 10). Here's where Alliance forces are deployed across Eastern Europe. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/10/europe/nato-troops-eastern-europe-map-intl-cmd/index.html>

Ringsmose, J., & Rynning, S. (2017). The NATO Response Force: A qualified failure no more? *Contemporary Security Policy*, 38(3), 443–456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2017.1350020>

Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe. (n.d.). NATO RESPONSE FORCE. SHAPE. Retrieved March 6, 2022, from <https://shape.nato.int/nato-response-force--very-high-readiness-joint-task-force>