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# **INFOFLASH**

**RAPID RESPONSE IN A CHANGING  
WORLD: THE NEW FORCE MODEL (NFM)  
AS A GAME CHANGER FOR NATO'S  
READINESS?**

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## Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of the 21st century is undergoing a profound transformation, with NATO's defence still at the centre of the Western world in this evolving security paradigm. The return of great-power competition, coupled with the increasing complexity of hybrid warfare, has exposed vulnerabilities in the Alliance's traditional defence structures. Nowhere has this been more evident than in Europe's eastern flank, where the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine shattered long-held assumptions about European security. This war has proven that large-scale conventional conflicts, once considered relics of the past, remain a pressing reality. In this scenario, NATO has been forced to rethink its rapid response mechanisms, transitioning from a reactive posture to a proactive deterrence envisioned to counter any conventional, hybrid, or asymmetric threat before it materialises into a full-blown crisis.

Acknowledging these contemporary challenges, this publication examines the structural evolution that led to establishing the New NATO Force Model (NFM), its implications for the Alliance's defence posture, and its interaction with European military contributions. The first section analyses the pre-existing defence model, focusing on the shortcomings of the previous task force that prompted the development of a new strategic framework. The second section explores the design of the NFM, assessing the rationale behind its creation, its structural composition, the military domains it encompasses, and the role of European allies within this framework. Finally, the third section evaluates the ongoing military exercise, Steadfast Dart 2025 (STDT25), as a case study to assess and refine the effectiveness of the Allied Reaction Force (ARF), a high-readiness, multidomain, multinational force training in operational scenarios.

## 1. Military Background

### *The NATO Response Force Framework*

Before the NFM, the NATO Response Force (NRF) was the defence strategy utilised by the Alliance. The NRF is a high-readiness, multinational military unit established in 2002 at the Prague summit, intended and designed for rapid global deployment. It integrates land, air, maritime, and Special Operations Forces (SOF) to conduct a wide range of missions, including humanitarian aid, crisis response, peacekeeping, and combat operations. Following the 'first force in, first force out' principle, the NRF ensures interoperability among members, enhancing technical, procedural, and human coordination. The NRF, commanded by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), consists of approximately 40,000 troops, structured into three main components: the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), the

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Initial Follow-On Forces Group, and the Response Forces Pool (Bruschetta, Santana, & De Valk, 2021).

The Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) was established at the 2014 Wales Summit as part of the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), aimed at countering emerging security challenges, particularly Russian military assertiveness in Eastern Europe. In Wales, the member states agreed to collaborate to “work multi-nationally for the joint development of forces and capabilities required by the Alliance” to respond “swiftly and firmly to the new security challenges”, mentioning Russia, the Middle East, and North Africa as the most urgent threats to deal with (Wales Summit Declaration, 2014, para. 5). Designed as NATO’s rapid-response ‘spearhead force,’ the VJTF is structured to deploy its lead elements within 48 hours, significantly enhancing the Alliance’s ability to react to crises and bolster deterrence measures. The force comprises approximately 20,000 troops, including a core multinational land brigade of 5,000 soldiers, complemented by additional maritime, air, and special operations forces (Bruschetta, Santana, & De Valk, 2021).

The establishment of the VJTF marked a significant evolution in NATO’s deterrence posture, particularly following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, which underscored the need for a more agile and responsive military structure. Operating under the SACEUR, the VJTF is managed on a rotational basis to ensure that multiple NATO members contribute to and benefit from high-readiness capabilities while maintaining interoperability and preparedness (Bosica, 2023). Specifically, interoperability is a key component of the VJTF. During the post-Cold War period, this concept was applied only at a divisional level, suffering severe gaps at the tactical level, as observed in previous NATO missions in Libya, Afghanistan, and Iraq. When it became clear that a higher degree of interoperability was necessary for prompt responses, targeted measures started to be carried out, such as multinational joint exercises and standardised operational procedures, to improve cooperation and reduce inefficiencies in force deployment (Bruschetta, Santana, & De Valk, 2021).

### *Shortcomings of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF)*

Despite its ambitious goals, the VJTF presents significant shortcomings that limit its effectiveness. Among the most pressing concerns are the inadequate size and the effective time of deployment in real-world operational scenarios. Regarding the former, the relatively small size of the force renders it insufficient to prevent or counter large-scale crises, such as scenarios depicting a potential Russian attack on Estonia have demonstrated. Secondly, while the VJTF is designed to deploy rapidly, its fastest elements take at least two days to arrive, with the remainder of the force assembling over a week. This slow deployment contradicts its intended role as NATO’s rapid response force, raising concerns about its

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operational effectiveness.

Financial constraints further complicate the VJTF's reliability. NATO's 'costs-lie-where-they-fall' approach means that contributing allies must bear the burden of upkeep, readiness, and training when it is their turn to lead the force (Bruschetta, Santana, & De Valk, 2021). Additionally, the eastern allies, which are most exposed to potential threats, must invest heavily in infrastructure to receive the VJTF on short notice—a requirement that is financially challenging and politically sensitive (Bruschetta, Santana, & De Valk, 2021). Another crucial issue revolves around the authority for its use of force. While the SACEUR can technically authorise deployment, the necessity of consulting national parliaments before committing troops represents a significant problem. Given the urgency required in an emergency scenario, this political hurdle may result in delays that undermine the very purpose of the VJTF as a high-readiness force (Hooker, 2024). Ultimately, these elements of instability raised questions about the sustainability of the VJTF as a long-term component of NATO's defence strategy.

To test VJTF's capabilities, multinational training exercises have been designed to evaluate both strengths and critical deficiencies that need to be addressed. For instance, simulations such as Exercise Noble Jump, held every year from 2015 to 2021, and Trident Juncture, held in 2018, have tested the force's interoperability within European land forces, showing progress in coordination but also exposing key weaknesses in real-world deployment readiness (Bruschetta, Santana, & De Valk, 2021). Similarly, the Crisis Management Exercise of 2019 has faced criticism for not effectively simulating credible deterrent conditions (Copsey & Mastriano, 2017). Concluding, these tests demonstrate that, while the VJTF served as a symbol of NATO cohesion, its structural and operational deficiencies prevented it from fully realising its strategic objectives. These challenges necessitated a broader reassessment of NATO's force structure, culminating in the 2022 Madrid Summit, where a new model was introduced to address the existing shortcomings. Adopting an overall constructive approach, the VJTF's operational experience played a crucial role in shaping the future NATO's approach to readiness and interoperability, reinforcing its role as a cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic security.

## **2. The New Force Model (NFM)**

*NFM's Rationale: Geopolitical Driving Forces and NATO Summits*

Building on the lessons learned from the VJTF, NATO recognised the urgent need for a more robust and scalable force structure to address the evolving security landscape. Russia's ongoing aggression, heightened by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, reaffirmed the

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necessity of a high-readiness force capable of rapid deployment. Considering that the campaign in Ukraine has evolved into a war of attrition, this Russian move proved the persistence of its imperial ambitions. With military reconstitution underway, Russian forces could threaten the Baltic states with minimal warning, effectively exposing NATO's vulnerabilities (Hooker, 2024). The strategic response to this looming threat was articulated in the Madrid and Vilnius Summits, which served as key milestones in NATO's adaptation to modern security challenges

The Madrid Summit in 2022 marked a turning point for the creation of a new NATO Strategic Concept. The Alliance formally recognised that "The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area," calling for a substantial shift in deterrence and defence posture (Madrid Summit Declaration, 2022, para. 5). The summit laid the groundwork for the NFM, transitioning from the NRF's outdated framework to a high-readiness structure capable of deploying over 100,000 troops within ten days and scaling up to 500,000 within six months (Barry et al., 2023). This transformation reflects a return to Cold War-era strategic concepts, emphasising forward defence and deterrence by denial (Monaghan et al., 2024).

The Vilnius Summit in 2023 further advanced these initiatives by integrating regional defence plans for the North, Centre, and South of Europe through the NFM, enhancing NATO's command and force structure (Gotkowska & Graca, 2023). Additionally, the concept of forward defence evolved, with enhanced command and control mechanisms, prepositioned equipment, and improved infrastructure enabling rapid reinforcement (Kennedy & Renken, 2025). Finally, it reinforced defence spending and industrial capacity, recognising that military readiness depends on sustained investments and cooperation among allies (Fisher & Bohrn, 2023). These developments profoundly underscore NATO's commitment to ensuring rapid response capabilities and maintaining collective security.

### *The NFM: Structure and Objectives*

Born during the Madrid Summit and refined during the Vilnius Summit, the NFM represents a fundamental restructuring of the Alliance's military posture, aiming to enhance readiness, deterrence, and collective defence. It replaces the NRF with a structured three-tier system, designed to ensure faster and more effective responses to emerging threats. Tier 1 consists of approximately 100,000 troops ready to deploy within 0 to 10 days, while Tier 2 includes 200,000 troops available within 10 to 30 days. Tier 3, the largest component, comprises 500,000 troops capable of mobilisation within 30 to 180 days (Deni, 2024). These forces are pre-assigned to specific regional defence plans, allowing for more focused training and operational integration.

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Another key aspect of the NFM is the increased emphasis on multinational cooperation. Indeed, the model encourages permanent multinational formations where national brigades systematically train together to harmonise doctrine, equipment, and combat support structures, to enhance interoperability and force cohesion. This shift ensures that European NATO members play a more central role in regional defence, reducing reliance on US reinforcements (Biscop, 2022). The model reflects NATO's strategic adaptation to contemporary security challenges, considering both conventional and hybrid threats. It has created a force structure that is more responsive, better coordinated, and prepared for rapid deployment in crises, reinforcing the Alliance's strategy with improved coordination and efficiency.

### *NATO Forces and the Relevance of European Interoperability*

The European role within the NFM is increasingly central as the alliance is shifting toward a more Europeanised defence posture after the Russian aggression. Given that most of NATO's land forces will need to be from Europe, European nations must develop more capable, integrated, and rapidly deployable land forces (Barry et al., 2023). While the United States remains a crucial actor, the Old Continent is expected to contribute at least half of the modern forces required for Euro-Atlantic defence, a shift driven by US strategic priorities and the possibility of simultaneous conflicts in Europe and the Indo-Pacific (Biscop, 2022). Despite the efforts, European land forces face significant challenges, including operational overstretch, outdated equipment, recruitment and retention difficulties, and the need to enhance combat service support capabilities.

Although investments in modernisation have accelerated, particularly in Poland and other frontline states after the Ukrainian crisis, financial constraints and competing budgetary priorities hinder full implementation. Moreover, multinational formations, essential for force generation at the scale envisioned by the NFM, present their difficulties, including variations in national caveats, rules of engagement, and interoperability issues (Barry et al., 2023). Improving military mobility within Europe and refining NATO's readiness evaluation standards are also critical points. The EU defence initiatives, including the European Defence Fund, could help address these capability gaps, ensuring that European forces are not only present but also combat-ready for high-intensity conflicts (Biscop, 2022). Ultimately, for the NFM to succeed, European states must move beyond rhetoric and commit to sustained defence investments, structural reforms, and deeper NATO-EU cooperation, ensuring that they can effectively respond to future security challenges.

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### 3. Train and Test: The Relevance of Real-World Military Exercises

#### *The Allied Reaction Force (ARF)*

After the creation of the NFM, NATO conducted the first large-scale military exercise - Steadfast Defender 2024, successfully exposing the areas to focus on for improvement. Being the largest NATO exercise since the Cold War, this initiative marked a significant milestone, since it demonstrated the Alliance's potential to mobilise and sustain forces across Europe. Furthermore, it tested the NFM forces' capacity for military mobility and readiness in high-intensity conflict scenarios, inspiring the creation of a new rapid deployment unit trained for these specific environments (Kennedy & Renken, 2025). Indeed, building on this momentum, NATO established the Allied Reaction Force (ARF), a high-readiness, multi-domain force designed to address operational requirements with increased efficiency.

The ARF was officially created during the Washington Summit in July 2024, where NATO members declared themselves "committed to delivering the required high readiness forces across all domains, including for a robust and agile Allied Reaction Force" in addition to the NFM's three-tiered forces (Washington Summit Declaration, 2024, para. 7). Rapidly deployed upon the orders of the SACEUR, this force plays a critical role in the new model, complementing regional defence plans by offering immediate military response options in both peacetime and crisis situations (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, 2024).

Unlike the NRF and its VJTF, the ARF is structured to overcome previous limitations in speed and force allocation. It integrates cyber and space elements alongside traditional land, air, and maritime forces, drawing these capabilities from NATO Allies with the necessary expertise and significantly improving the Alliance's ability to respond to hybrid threats (Deni, 2024). Moreover, to ensure operational readiness, force-sourcing conferences are held annually to identify and certify units two years in advance. Once certified, ARF units enter a stand-by phase from July to June, aligning with NATO's exercise cycle. To validate their preparedness, rapid deployment exercises and snap drills are conducted, though their scope often depends on available funding. Overall, the ARF's training prioritises Article 5 scenarios to strengthen deterrence and defence operations while also maintaining crisis management capabilities (Deni, 2024). However, despite advancements in force generation, gaps in specialised capabilities persist, making real-world military exercises a crucial tool for assessing and refining the force's effectiveness.

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## *Steadfast Dart 25 (STDT25)*

Considering the above-mentioned objective, NATO is currently conducting exercise Steadfast Dart 2025 (STDT25), the Alliance's largest military exercise of the year. Designed by the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), it aims to assess and train the ARF's rapid deployment, mobility, and combat readiness in a real-world high-intensity conflict scenario (NATO Exercises and Activities, 2025). The operation, primarily carried out in Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania, runs from January 8th to February 21st, and it tests NATO's ability to rapidly deploy and sustain forces over thousands of kilometres in response to a simulated near-peer adversary conflict. With 10,000 personnel from nine NATO allies—Bulgaria, France, Greece, Italy, Romania, Spain, Slovenia, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom—STDT25 serves as a critical demonstration of the Alliance's readiness and interoperability (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, (n.d.)). The exercise is conducted across multiple domains and consists of two primary phases. The first focuses on training for rapid deployment, involving the movement of troops and equipment across vast distances by land, sea, and air. The second phase, beginning on February 10th, shifts to intensive training in a multinational environment (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, 2025c).

Key components include large-scale force movements, airborne and amphibious operations, and live-fire exercises to validate combat effectiveness. A significant focus is placed on testing NATO's military mobility, logistics, and sustainment capabilities, ensuring forces can be quickly reinforced along the Alliance's eastern flank (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, 2025a). STDT25 also emphasises the integration of multinational forces in complex warfighting conditions, requiring swift decision-making and coordination between different military branches. Troops conduct combined arms manoeuvres, air forces execute close air support and air-to-air combat drills, and naval forces secure key maritime routes while performing amphibious landings to enhance power projection (Marina Militare, 2025).

Reflecting the evolving nature of warfare, STDT25 incorporates cyber and space operations to test NATO's resilience against cyber threats, electronic warfare, and satellite disruptions, ensuring robust intelligence-sharing and communications in contested environments (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, 2025b). This test refines NATO's ability to operate in multi-domain battlespaces, reinforcing its technological edge and strategic deterrence. Finally, the command-and-control structure is led by NATO Rapid Deployable Corps Italy (NRDC-ITA), ensuring effective coordination among participating forces (Marina Militare, 2025). The exercise culminates in a series of high-intensity warfighting scenarios designed to stress-test NATO's ability to respond to crises with speed and precision, demonstrating its capacity to defend its members against emerging threats (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, (n.d.)).



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## Conclusion

The New NATO Force Model has marked a decisive shift in the Alliance's defence posture, attempting to address the shortcomings of the NATO Response Force and the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force. By restructuring its forces into a three-tier system and establishing the Allied Reaction Force, NATO aims to enhance rapid deployment, interoperability, and deterrence capabilities. Steadfast Dart 2025 has served as a crucial test for this new structure, demonstrating NATO's ability to conduct large-scale, high-intensity operations while highlighting areas needing refinement, particularly in command structure, logistical coordination, and force readiness. In conclusion, this paper underscores the transformative impact of the NFM on NATO's strategic agility, highlighting the critical importance of continued adaptation to maintain credible deterrence and collective defence in a dynamic security landscape.

Looking ahead, experts suggest that NATO must ensure the ARF's effectiveness by developing a dedicated maritime component, streamlining command responsibilities, and intensifying readiness verification through snap exercises and no-notice drills. Greater integration between NATO and the European defence industry is essential to sustain force modernisation and stockpiling efforts (Deni, 2024). As geopolitical tensions persist, particularly with Russia's unpredictable threat against the Baltic states, NATO's ability to maintain credible deterrence will depend on sustained investment, structural reforms, and stronger multinational cooperation. The challenge is not just refining military structures but ensuring that NATO remains a unified, agile, and credible force in an increasingly volatile world.

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