

IISS

MILITARY BALANCE BLOG

July 6th, 2026

Ruben Stewart

NATO's three-front problem

NATO's regional defence plans divide Europe into three operational fronts, but the emerging architecture exposes issues in command, rear-area sustainment and the availability of enabling forces required to turn headquarters into warfighting formations.

At the 2023 Vilnius summit, NATO approved a [new generation of regional defence plans](#) that divide the defence of the Alliance into three broad operational areas: the High North and Atlantic, known as Joint Operations Area-Northwest (JOA-NW), commanded from Joint Force Command (JFC) Norfolk, Virginia; the central region, known as Joint Operations Area-Centre (JOA-C), commanded from JFC Brunssum; and the southeast, known as Joint Operations Area-Southeast (JOA-SE), commanded from JFC Naples.

Across those [geographic fronts](#), NATO faces three functional problems: seams between commands, competition in the rear area, and gaps in the enablers required for a credible command architecture.

Map 1: NATO: Joint Operations Areas and selected land headquarters



Three fronts, three problems

JOA-NW runs from the [North Atlantic and High North through the Nordic region](#). Its primary challenges are access, reinforcement and the protection of NATO's strategic lines of communication. Russia's Northern Fleet, long-range strike systems, undersea activity and Arctic proximity make the northwestern front primarily a maritime–air–land problem, but its [centre of gravity](#) is the transatlantic bridge connecting North American reinforcement to Europe. [NATO's Multi-Corps Land Component Command Northwest in Mikkeli](#), Finland, reflects that geography by linking Nordic land defence to JFC Norfolk's wider mission of securing the North Atlantic and enabling reinforcement of Europe.

JOA-C is NATO's clearest air–land front, stretching from Estonia to Hungary and encompassing the Baltic states, Germany, Poland and the reinforcement corridors from western Europe to the eastern flank. Its corps geography now has a discernible north-to-south logic: [1 German-Netherlands Corps \(1GNC\)](#) is assigned to Estonia and Latvia; [Multinational Corps Northeast \(MNC-NE\)](#) remains central to [Lithuania, northeastern Poland and the Suwałki problem](#); [US V Corps Forward in Poznań](#) anchors the [United States' contribution to eastern-flank defence and the Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative](#); and Poland's 2nd Corps in Kraków provides a national warfighting headquarters (HQ) for the central front. NATO is turning the central front into a multi-corps command area, with [Multi-Corps Land Component Command-Centre \(MCLCC-C\) in Wiesbaden](#) providing the land-component layer needed to coordinate corps activity across the central front.

JOA-SE runs from [Romania southwards through Bulgaria](#), and across [the Adriatic, Mediterranean and Black Seas](#). Russia's options here differ from those in the central region, but the area is politically and operationally congested. Crimea, Black Sea access, the Turkish Straits, Balkan instability and Türkiye–Greece tensions all matter, as do the land and maritime lines of communication that run across the Adriatic, Mediterranean and Black Seas. [Multi-Corps Land Component Command-Southeast in İzmir](#), the role of [Multinational Corps Southeast \(MNC-SE\) in Romania](#), and [Türkiye's work to establish a new multinational corps HQ, tentatively named Multinational Corps-Türkiye \(MNC-TÜR\), based on the Turkish 6th Corps in Adana](#), all suggest NATO is applying a similar multi-corps logic to the southeast.

Seams

NATO's command architecture will be tested along its seams, the most visible of which is in the Baltics.

Assigning 1GNC to Estonia and Latvia while MNC-NE remains central to Lithuania and northeastern Poland may improve command functions, but it also creates a corps boundary across a shallow and vulnerable area. 1GNC's rear area will depend heavily on [routes through Lithuania and the narrow Suwałki Corridor, squeezed between Kaliningrad and Belarus](#). MNC-NE's close fight would, therefore, include holding the corridor's shoulders firm enough to keep 1GNC's rear area connected to reinforcement and sustainment. Coordinating one corps' sustainment through another corps' close fight will place a difficult burden on MCLCC-C.

During the Cold War, NATO's land defence was multinational above corps level, but largely national at corps level. The Alliance's current laydown includes multinational, binational and national corps HQ. National corps, such as US V Corps and Polish 2nd Corps, are expected to provide national enablers, while multinational corps, such as MNC-NE, MNC-SE and the planned MNC-TÜR, may depend on a mix of framework-nation support, multinational augmentation and theatre-level assets. 1GNC is different as a binational HQ. Within multinational and binational corps, national components create internal seams that corps commanders must manage. Despite NATO Standardization Agreements, [different national equipment, procedures and authorities still create friction](#). The MCLCC's task is to coordinate between corps with different structures, authorities and enabler models before a crisis, rather than post hoc improvisation.

NATO forces depend on national authorities for permission to enter, transit through and operate on national territory, rear-area protection, civil-military coordination, host-nation support and reception, staging, onward movement, and integration. NATO has already recognised this problem through [NATO Force Integration Units, which link national forces, NATO commands and reinforcing forces](#), which mitigate rather than remove the host-nation seam. A corps HQ may command formations, but the host nation controls much of the terrain, infrastructure and civilian machinery through which those formations fight, move and sustain themselves.

Sustainment

The multinational complexity of NATO and its three-front geography amplify sustainment challenges.

The multinational sustainment burden is visible even at battlegroup level. Exercises of NATO's Multinational Battlegroup in Lithuania [included](#) allied contributions moved in by sea, rail and air, including various types of armoured fighting vehicles and artillery. That constitutes a demanding mix of ammunition, spare parts, recovery assets, tools, mechanical expertise and national technical chains for a relatively small force. Multinational units inherently multiply sustainment challenges. Joint Support and Enabling Command's (JSEC) work shows that NATO must prepare conditions for reinforcement and sustainment across the theatre, as forces and supplies may have to move through one JOA to sustain another. For example, the Baltic states and Poland could draw support across the Baltic Sea from JOA-NW, while Romania, Hungary or the Balkans may depend on routes crossing the JOA-C/JOA-SE seam. Ports, railheads, airfields, permissions, host-nation support and movement-control systems therefore become shared theatre assets needed to make NATO's regional plans executable.

Gaps

Gaps exist both in NATO's command map and in the enablers that turn HQs into warfighting formations.

Extensive fronts require commanders to balance forces, particularly shifting scarce assets between fronts. Cold War NATO [planned](#) for corps frontages narrower than those implied by today's lower-density, deeper and more transparent battlefield. Ukraine has illustrated this issue, wherein forces can be locally outmatched if stretched too thin.

Europe faces resource constraints that would only be exacerbated by a [major US drawdown](#). Corps headquarters need corps troops; deep fires; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; engineers; air defence; aviation; electronic warfare; counter-uninhabited aerial systems; logistics; medical capacity; and resilient command and control. Many European armies preserved or regenerated HQs after the Cold War faster than they rebuilt these enabling layers, resulting in a gap between command architecture and usable combat power. This is illustrated by long-range fires. [Uncertainty around the planned US long-range fires deployment to Germany](#) shows European dependency on the US in key capabilities. European initiatives, such as the European Long-range Strike Approach, are [developing alternatives](#), but they will take time to mature.

The Supreme Allied Commander Europe's (SACEUR's) strategic reserves, including formations such as the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps and French 1st Army Corps, are operational enablers. But once committed to an MCLCC, they must provide enough organic corps-level enabling capacity, or they risk consuming the very enablers that the MCLCC's forward corps already lacks. This is why the United States' '[NATO 3.0](#)' vision, under which it is seeking to reduce what US European Command has called an 'unhealthy co-dependence' on US contributions to the NATO Force Model, is important. If US enablers are [delayed, reduced, retasked or politically constrained before European capacity is ready](#), this will present platform shortfalls and theatre-integration issues.

One campaign, three fronts

NATO faces a three-front problem that requires it to defend the northwest, centre and southeast simultaneously while its commands in those areas compete for resources and depend on each other. For instance, a High North crisis could consume assets needed to reinforce Poland, while a Black Sea emergency could draw scarce enablers away from the central region. Sustainment for one JOA may also flow through another, and pressure in one front may require supporting action from forces, infrastructure or command nodes elsewhere.

NATO's future land-defence posture is becoming clearer. JFCs integrate joint activity within the JOAs, MCLCCs provide the operational land layer, corps headquarters give the plans territorial and tactical form, and JSEC shows how reinforcement and sustainment might flow through the rear area. The harder test is whether NATO can generate the enablers, sustainment and coherence to fight across the command architecture it is reconstructing for the European theatre.