

DGAP POLICY BRIEF

Preventing the Next War

Germany and NATO Are in a Race Against Time



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With its imperial ambitions, Russia represents the greatest and most urgent threat to NATO countries. Once intensive fighting will have ended in Ukraine, the regime in Moscow may need as little as six to ten years to reconstitute its armed forces. Within that timeframe, Germany and NATO must enable their armed forces to deter and, if necessary, fight against Russia. Only then will they be in a position to reduce the risk of another war breaking out in Europe.

- Germany and NATO can only reliably influence their own ability to deter and defend – not whether Russia wants to wage another war.
- The time Russia needs to reconstitute its armed forces determines NATO's need for speed. The alliance must be able to fend off a Russian attack in six years. The longer timeline already increases the risk of war.
- NATO's strategy paths range from "Better safe than sorry" to "Fighting with the army you have." With all of them, the risk of war is different, but so are the political and economic payoffs. Additional geostrategic options can buy NATO time.
- Germany must deliver a quantum leap: Within the shortest time possible, it must build up the Bundeswehr in terms of personnel, expand arms production, and improve resilience. This will only be possible if there is a change of mentality in society.

STRATEGIC REEVALUATION OF RUSSIA

The question for NATO and Germany no longer is whether they will ever need to be able to fight a war against another country, but only when. In its new strategic concept, NATO describes Russia as the greatest and most urgent threat to the security of its 31 allies and for peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.¹ In contrast to earlier analyses, the alliance no longer rules out a Russian attack.

It is Russia that defines this timeframe through a combination of long-held motivation and increasing war capability. The window for a possible Russian attack will open as soon as Russia believes that an attack, for instance on the Baltic states, could meet with success.

Strong Motivation

Russia has consistently shown its aggressive motivation over two decades. President Vladimir Putin and Kremlin elites and intelligentsia have long cherished the ambition to restore Russia's powerful empire and push back the influence of NATO and the EU.² The historical categories in which they think are based on analogies with the Tsarist empire and the Soviet Union. In their thinking, Russia exists well beyond its current borders (a concept called *Rusky Mir*) – it extends to any place where Russians have ever lived in or where the Russian empire or the Soviet Union have ever ruled. Putin does not consider the borders established after the break-up of the Soviet Union to be binding.³ Countries belonging to NATO today include the Baltic States, which used to be part of Russia and of the Soviet Union.

Putin's ideology and interpretation of history already motivated the wars in Chechnya and Georgia. Russia's constitution includes a provision to reintegrate Belarus into the Russian state; this is currently

being implemented. In 2014, Putin started the war in Ukraine. Despite having failed to achieve even one of its war goals to date, Moscow has escalated the conflict into Europe's largest war in 75 years.

It has also repeatedly threatened individual NATO countries and NATO as a whole with the use of nuclear weapons.⁴

Increasing War Capability

Even after nearly two years of combat in Ukraine, the Russian war capability is greater than the current impression suggests. The Russian land forces suffered the greatest losses in terms of personnel and materiel; they will represent the main reconstitution effort. While the air force has also lost qualified personnel, its losses in terms of materiel are relatively minor (about 10 to 15 percent). At the same time, both services have demonstrated their adaptability. Russia's navy has suffered heavy losses in its Black Sea Fleet, but the Baltic, Pacific and Northern fleets continue to be ready for use. Both the strategic missile force and the cyber and space forces are likely to have remained largely intact.

Russia can train about 280,000 recruits per year. In six years, this adds up to nearly 1.7 million and in ten years to 2.8 million people with **military training**. By training in the units that currently fight in Ukraine, recruits will benefit from their combat experience.⁵

Currently, Russia is using revenue from its oil and gas exports to transform its arms industry into a war industry. It has boosted output in some segments and kept important workers in production. At the same time, it has managed to circumvent Western sanctions on components considered crucial to the war effort like microchips or ball bearings and raw materials. In addition, Russia imports arms and munitions from allied states such as Iran and North Korea.

1 NATO (Ed.), NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, RN 6 und 8, no place.

2 Yaroslav Trofimov, How Far Do Putin's Imperial Ambitions Go?, in: The Wall Street Journal (June 24, 2023) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-far-do-putin-imperial-ambitions-go-11656085978> (accessed November 8, 2023), as well as LMU Newsroom, { Interview with the historian Martin Schulze Wessel} Putin ist in seinen historischen imperialen Denkmustern gefangen. (August 23, 2023) <https://www.lmu.de/de/newsroom/newsuebersicht/news/putin-ist-in-seinen-historischen-imperialen-denkmustern-gefangen.html> (accessed November 8, 2023)

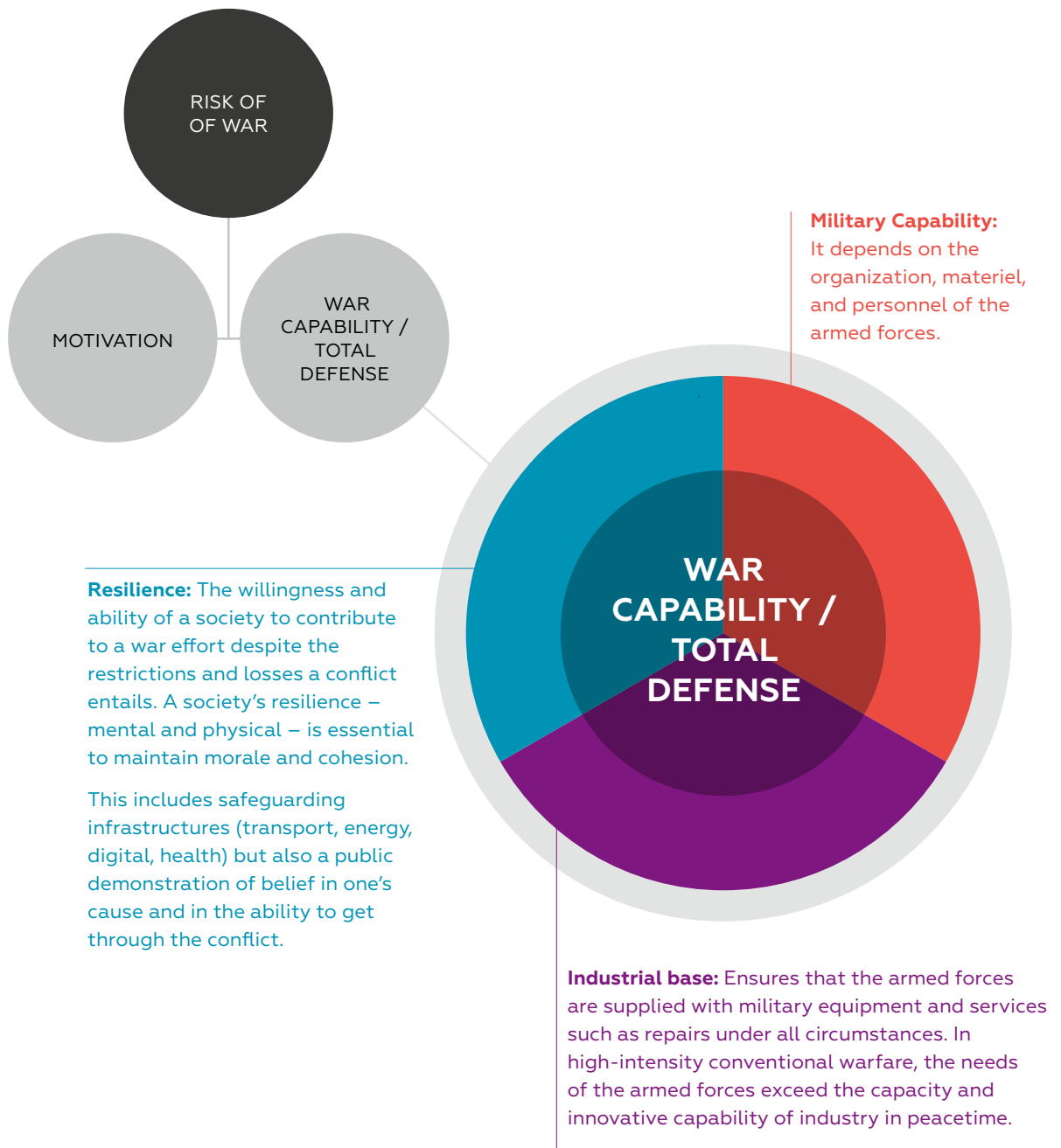
3 See for instance Michael Stürmer, Der Kreml-Herr lässt die Europäer frösteln, in: Die Welt (January 19, 2016) <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kolumnen/Weltlage/article151183437/Der-Kreml-Herr-laesst-die-Europaeer-froesteln.html> (accessed November 8, 2023). Putin put forward the first elements of his idea of a great Russia, which has citizens who cannot live in Russia, early on. The first time he spoke of this was at the Bergedorf Round Table in 1994. Available in: Körber Stiftung (ed.), Protokoll, Bergedorfer Gesprächskreis 101, Russland und der Westen, 1994, no place and date, available on request from the Foundation.

4 Anna Clara Arndt and Liviu Horovitz, Eine Chronologie der nuklearen Anspielungen Moskaus im Krieg gegen die Ukraine, Working Paper SWP-International Security Division, AP NR. 2, May 2022, Berlin, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, May 2022; Sten Hankewitz, Putin vaguely threatens the Estonian town of Narva, in: Estonian World (June 11, 2022) <https://estonianworld.com/security/putin-vaguely-threatens-the-estonian-town-of-narva> (accessed November 8, 2023)

5 See for instance Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, Meatgrinder: Russian Tactics in the Second Year of Its Invasion of Ukraine, RUSI – Special Report, London, May 19, 2023, <https://static.rusi.org/403-SR-Russian-Tactics-web-final.pdf> (accessed November 8, 2023); Jack Watling und Nick Reynolds, Stormbreak: Fighting Through Russian Defences in Ukraine's 2023 Offensive, RUSI – Special Report, London, September 2023, https://static.rusi.org/Stormbreak-Special-Report-web-final_0.pdf (accessed November 8, 2023)

Fig. 1 – Risk of War, War Capability, and Total Defense

Total defense = war capability without an aggressive motivation.
Both terms are used in this policy brief. War capability is an analytical term.



Russia faces fewer major challenges than the West regarding the resilience of its society. The regime violently suppresses every emergence of civil society. Society's willingness to accept the loss of human life is obviously great, as the war in Ukraine has already cost Russia over 250,000 dead and wounded. Economically, the state appears to be able to continue financing its war.⁶

Russia's Window of Opportunity: 6 to 10 Years

Experts and intelligence services estimate that it will take Russia six to ten years to rebuild its army to the point where it could dare to attack NATO. The clock will start ticking as soon as intense fighting in Ukraine comes to a halt. Then Russia can redirect its current production toward the reconstitution of the armed forces.⁷

NATO: SPEED DETERMINES THE RELEVANCE OF EFFORTS

NATO has changed its defense plans (see box on the right). However, there is no agreement regarding the most important factor: speed. Until when should the plans be implemented? In order to prevent a possible war, the window of opportunity for Moscow must not open. Russia must recognize a conflict with NATO as hopeless from the outset and at all times. To ensure this outcome, NATO should quickly increase its war capability and communicate this visibly to Russia. This is even more important because there is little hope of changing the Russian regime's motivation or of activating society against the regime.

A Race Against Time

The timeline for implementing these plans can be clearly established: It is defined by the time that the Russian armed forces will need for their reconstitution, meaning six to ten years after the end of high-intensity fighting in Ukraine.

NATO must complete its own repositioning at least one year before Russia reaches war capability. This would offer the Kremlin the chance to recognize in time that the Russian window of opportunity for a successful attack on NATO has not opened. Given the Russian time of reconstitution, NATO must therefore

NATO'S RESPONSE

NATO has changed its defense plans: Should Russia attack, NATO now intends to stop it right on the border of the allied territory. This is to prevent Russian troops from committing atrocities against the civilian population. The alliance also wants to preempt the risk of a "fait accompli": If Russia were to succeed in capturing a larger territory, it could propose a territorial deal to the NATO states that could divide the alliance politically.

To be able to defend „every meter of NATO territory," according to the formula chosen by US President Joe Biden, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and others, NATO at its summit meetings in Madrid 2022 and Vilnius 2023 reorganized its defense planning. At the heart of the new plan are:

- **NATO's New Force Model:** 300.000 troops are to be maintained in high readiness.
- **Regional defense plans:** They specify which member of the alliance carries which kind of responsibility for defense in which area and therefore needs to supply military force to that end.

reach war capability within five to nine years to be able to deter Russia from going to war.

Any troops or systems that NATO countries deploy only a short time before Russia's reconstitution is achieved will not impact Russia's considerations. Russia would underestimate NATO's combat readiness and could be tempted to start a war.

Strategy Paths: Opting for Security or for Risk

Rapid implementation of NATO defense plans achieves a greater and earlier deterrence effect. On the downside, there are the political-economic costs and the military and industrial consequences of an accelerated military build-up. The tension between both aspects

6 See for instance Darya Korsunskaya and Alexander Marrow, Russia's optimistic fiscal plans risk budget revenue shortfall, Reuters.com (October 19, 2023) <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/russias-optimistic-fiscal-plans-risk-budget-revenue-shortfall-2023-10-19> (accessed November 8, 2023)

7 Interviews with intelligence services, defense planners in the Bundeswehr in NATO, and public sources. For instance, Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, International Security and Estonia 2023, (January 2023), pp 11-12, <https://www.valisluureamet.ee/doc/raport/2023-en.pdf> (accessed November 8, 2023)

defines the bandwidth for NATO's strategy paths. The following table outlines five options and describes their advantages and disadvantages. The differences between them are the time factor and the risk of war.

If the assumption is that NATO still has a decade until it must be able to deter Russia, the required effort becomes easier to digest in political terms: The burden on public budgets is spread over the terms of several governments. The build-up of force structures and procurement can be continued as planned. Industry can maintain its production plans. NATO countries would also have more time to build up their total defense.

However, if Moscow manages to have its armed forces ready after only six years, NATO will find it increasingly impossible to catch up.

The reason is that it takes a long time for plans to become reality in Europe: At least two years are needed to set up new production lines for missiles or tanks or to establish larger military units. The more speed is needed, the more the standards for instance for training or weaponry will have to change. An army formed within five years is different from one that has nine years to be available. Qualitatively, it will be at the current level, but in quantitative terms, the structures will be replenished, and it will be possible to create reserves.

These assumptions result in two scenarios with a total of six points in time and time frames, which are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Fig. 2 – Strategy Paths for NATO and its Member States

STRATEGY PATH	DESCRIPTION	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES	RISK OF WAR	
SECURITY STRATEGIES	A BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early and massive investment in NATO capabilities: Europe invests within the next two years • Industrial capability goals for the next 5 to 10 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More acceptance for military spending while the public is still highly aware of the war in Ukraine and Russia's threats • The focus on speed favors simple solutions such as scaling up procurement of standardized products • Weapons systems are improved incrementally • Powerful signal to Russia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High costs at a time of economic difficulties • The level of defense capability must be maintained after early achievement • High complexity due to the need to coordinate measures • Companies have to adapt their production plans • Armed forces must cope with very rapid changeover 	Very low
	B CONTROL IS BETTER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment and force generation happen in time for NATO to build up its own capabilities before Russia achieves an early reconstitution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparatively lower expenditure or expenditure spread over a longer period than with strategy A • Projects and structures can be better planned and target achievement monitored • A weaker but possibly sufficient signal toward Russia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As attention for the Ukraine war decreases it becomes more challenging to justify the required efforts to the public 	Low
	C PLAY WITH FIRE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment happens along a timeline that allows NATO to build up its own capabilities before Russia achieves a late reconstitution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced expenditure stretched over a longer period of time • Less pressure on armed forces and industry to adapt projects and structures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investments in lengthy armaments projects become more likely, which entails the risk of delays • As there is little awareness yet of Russia's arms build-up, it is difficult to justify the required efforts to the public • Path dependency of industry and armed forces prevents a more agile defense sector • Possibility of miscalculation of Russian reconstitution with little time to react 	Medium to high
RISK STRATEGIES	D BOILING FROG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment will only be started once the Russian reconstitution has already become visible and is taking place faster than NATO is increasing its capabilities. At this point in time, NATO at least sets itself the goal of achieving the deterrent effect in time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost relief for the present, but higher expenditure at a later date • Public acceptance increases as the Russian arms build-up becomes noticeable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delaying investment in capabilities by seven years could make it technically impossible to achieve a deterrent effect • In this situation, Russia might be tempted to attack in order to preempt the build-up of NATO forces 	Very high
	E YOU GO TO WAR WITH THE ARMY YOU HAVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment will only be approved once the Russian threat has become manifest in public discourse. The Russian reconstitution, which is already well advanced, opens the window of war • The Kremlin has a clear incentive not to waste any time, as its advantage will dwindle from this moment on 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost relief for the present • Public acceptance increases as the Russian arms build-up becomes highly visible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The risk of war increases. Investment comes too late to provide deterrence, and a window of opportunity opens for Russia • Highest risk of losing the war and dividing NATO • High costs for high-tech projects that have been started but now have to be abandoned 	Extremely high

Source: Authors' own compilation

Fig. 3 – NATO Security Strategies A & B

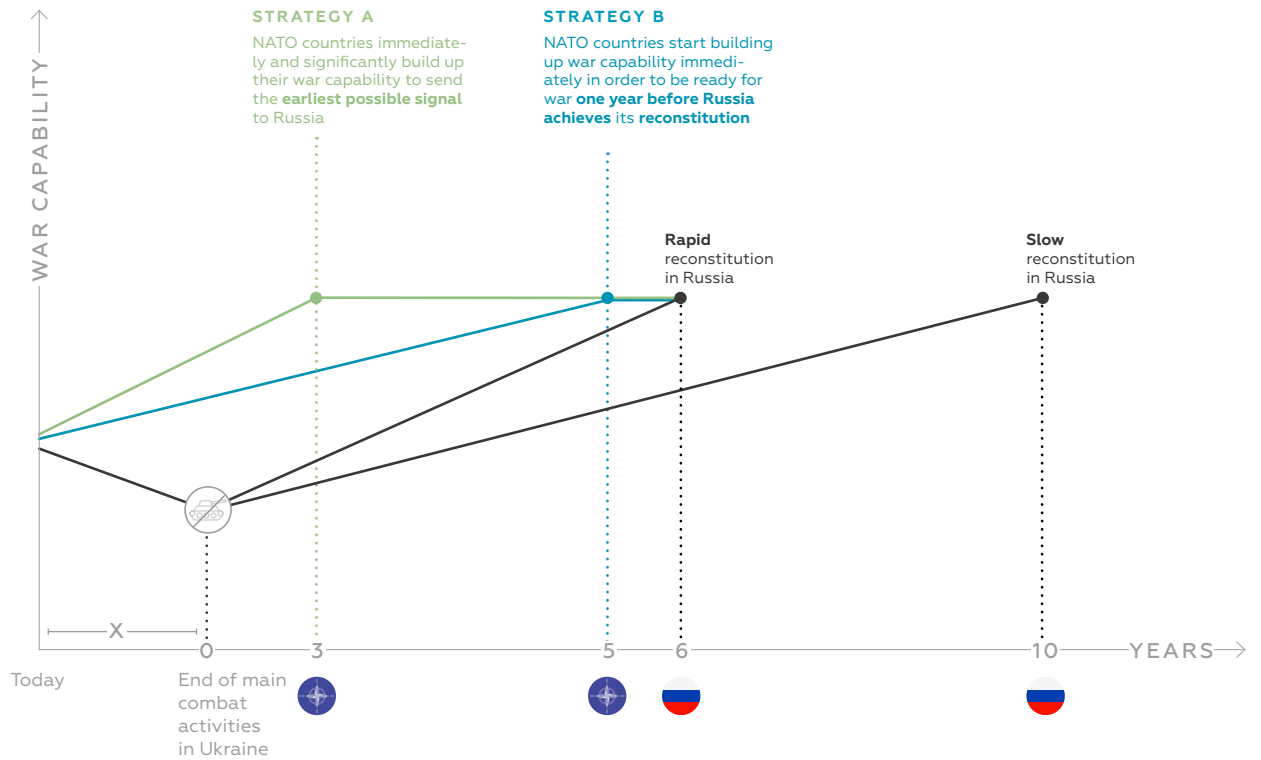
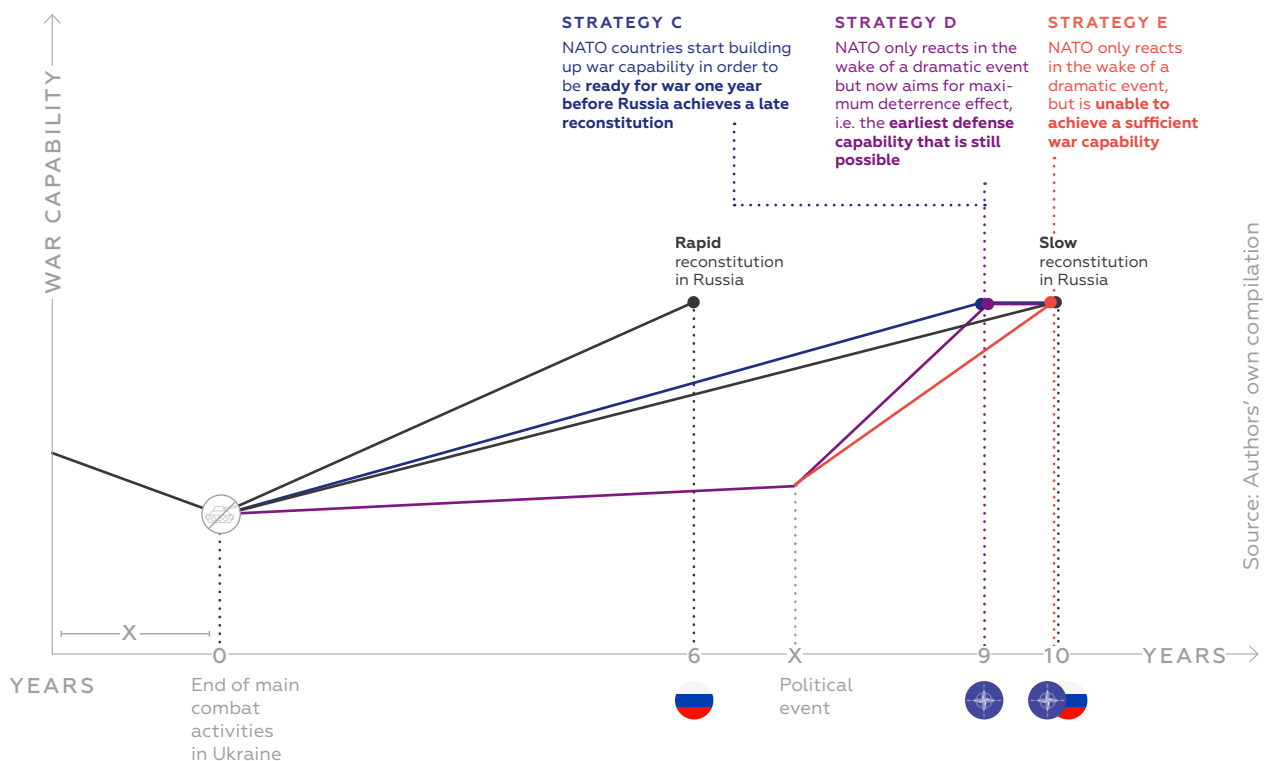


Fig. 4 – NATO RISK STRATEGIES C, D, & E



EXTENDED OPTIONS

Irrespective of the strategy path chosen, there are four areas in which NATO can take additional action to improve its position vis-à-vis Russia:

Option I: Gain Time

NATO must make use of the time left until the intensive fighting in Ukraine ends and Russia can begin the reconstitution of its armed forces. This means boosting support for Ukraine to the extent that the Ukrainian armed forces have a chance of inflicting a defeat on Russia on Ukrainian territory with their next offensives. This would not only further reduce Russia's combat power. NATO could thereby also demonstrate its resolve and hope that a Russian defeat will change the Kremlin's strategy. Nevertheless, NATO must strike a balance between supporting Ukraine and reinforcing its own combat capability.

Option II: Integrate Ukraine into the European Defense Sector

Europe should immediately begin to work with Ukraine to plan and implement the country's long-term integration into Western defense and armaments. Ukraine is already part of the Western defense system. The announced membership in EU and NATO will further strengthen this connection. Given that the conflict with Russia is likely to continue for decades, Ukraine's location on the border to Russia and Belarus means that the country will continue to be of outstanding geostrategic importance to Europe's security.

Option III: Establish a More Balanced Relationship with the United States

All these plans are overshadowed by the concern that the United States could reduce its support for the defense of Europe. For this reason, Europeans should use the necessary efforts to achieve their own war capability to also establish a more balanced relationship with the United States. The moment is favorable: The United States expects Europe to become more self-reliant, and if Europe can refute the accusation of an unfair burden-sharing, it would help President Biden in his reelection campaign.

Option IV: Hamper Russia's Production

The hopes attached to the sanctions have been disappointed in many cases. Nevertheless, trade restrictions offer an opportunity to impede the development of the Russian war economy. To this end, the Western

measures need to be fully implemented and extended to a much broader range of goods. Currently, Russia's armaments are not based on high-tech but on mass production. Technology that may seem outdated to the West is sufficient for Russia's warfare.

GERMANY NEEDS TO TAKE A QUANTUM LEAP

The German government wants to turn the Bundeswehr into Europe's strongest army and the backbone of allied defense. Yet its plans for military renewal known as "Zeitenwende" are faltering. To reach its goals, Germany will have to take a quantum leap in the reconstruction of the Bundeswehr, the renewal of the defense industrial base, and the strengthening of society's resilience.

A Security Decade

The change of mentality, which has often been called for, will only happen if overall defense becomes a part of everyday life in politics, the economy, and civil society. The current narrowing of the debate to a classic war is wrong. On the one hand, there are risks apart from a possible Russian attack that Germany must urgently prepare for. On the other hand, a Russian attack would not only be aimed at military targets but at the entire range of weaknesses shown by Western societies. As a result, the question is not only how politics and society will deal with Germans getting killed or wounded in the event of war, both practically and mentally. It is also about improving the protection against cyberattacks and disinformation, as can be seen today in Russia's war on Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas conflict.

The German government could set a starting point for the required change in everyday life by proclaiming a "Security Decade"⁸ together with the Bundestag as well as the governments and parliaments of the federal states: a ten-year social contract to prepare Germany for possible future conflicts. This would redefine the strategic framework for Germany's actions. At the same time, the time horizon in which important players, including ministries, parliaments, the Court of Auditors and other experts, consider and evaluate the state's tasks and expenditure would be extended beyond the legislative period. In order for a new policy to emerge, it is also necessary to make additional funds available for the Security Decade.

8 For more details on this, see Sören Hellmonds, Christian Mölling, Torben Schütz, Zeitschleife statt Zeitenwende. Die Bundeswehr bleibt in der strukturellen Unterfinanzierung, in: DGAP Policy Brief 15/2023 (June 15, 2023)

The change in everyday life could be widely advertised, for example by using the motto: “**Less regulation, more investment.**” This could include a ten-year moratorium on non-essential regulations and a preference given to investments in total defense. In addition to the armed forces and industry, total defense also includes disaster protection and other elements that make the relevant systems more resilient. This requires investment across the board.

Armed Forces

It is obvious that the reconstruction of the Bundeswehr at the current pace will come too late for NATO, even if Russia’s reconstitution also happens slowly. After the shock caused by Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the *Bundeswehr* drew up plans in 2016 to achieve its NATO goals within approximately 15 years – in the early 2030s. Half of this period has now elapsed without any substantial improvement. The first of the three divisions earmarked for reinforcing NATO’s deterrence will not be ready for deployment in 2025 as planned. A second division planned for 2027 faces a similar fate.

New planning: The German government must adapt the procurement system and the force structure to the goal of fulfilling its commitments in a timely manner.⁹ It is important to clearly identify what is feasible within the next few years. Priority should be given to investments which immediately increase Germany’s war capability, such as the procurement of ammunition, spare parts, and logistics, as well as of rapidly deployable capabilities such as small drones.

Building on the experience gained from training the Ukrainian army, military training should be adapted to the reality of the modern battlefield. Training should include supposedly trivial activities that are currently overregulated or even prohibited, such as flying tactical drones over practicing personnel or digging trenches. A moratorium on regulations that are not essential for the protection of life and limb can generate more leeway for procurement and training, but only if change filters down to everyday life.

In the long term, the greatest challenge for the Bundeswehr is to recruit enough **personnel**, including a reserve. While there currently is a shortage of new soldiers, many who do serve with Germany’s armed forces struggle with a lack of meaning or a lack of

career opportunities. A personnel strategy should focus on creating a sense of purpose. At the same time, it should give older officers an opportunity to take honorable early retirement. This strategy should be linked to efforts to strengthen the resilience of the entire population. Consideration should also be given to shortening training for the reserve. Here, too, the training of the Ukrainian army by the German Armed Forces offers valuable lessons.

Procurement and the arms industry

Traditionally, Germany does not have a **defense industrial policy framework** to define cooperation between the federal government and industry. Yet Germany must now act swiftly to create the political preconditions that are necessary to ensure the security of supply of the armed forces.

Quantity over quality: When it comes to equipment, the Bundeswehr should rely on tried and tested systems that can be produced quickly in large quantities. Generally, the technical quality of existing weapons systems will be sufficient to perform adequately against Russia. Nevertheless, their further development can – and must – continue, but incrementally. This also has the advantage of creating an alternative innovation path to risky large-scale projects while buying time to push forward with them. In any case, given the concrete danger to Germany and NATO, the planned Main Battle Tank System (MGCS) and the Future Air Combat System (FCAS) will not be ready in time, as their production will only start in another 12 to 15 years.

Expand production capacity: It takes at least two years to set up new production lines for tanks or missiles. Germany should now order all the materiel it needs to fully equip its armed forces, including reserves and consumables such as ammunition or spare parts. While the industry gains investment security, the Bundeswehr will obtain better prices. Industry and, above all, its many suppliers, need such guarantees today if they are to considerably expand production in two years’ time. In addition, the government and parliament should work to allow companies easier access to credit and to accelerate the approval process for new factories. Refurbishing old materiel that is still usable is yet another way to increase quantity. Germany and its allies should also build up a strategic reserve of raw materials – at national or European level.

9 See Debatte über »Kriegstüchtigkeit«. SPD-Fraktionschef geht auf Distanz zu Verteidigungsminister Pistorius, in Spiegel online (November 5, 2023) <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/debatte-ueber-kriegstuechtigkeit-spd-fraktionschef-geht-auf-distanz-zu-boris-pistorius-a-4a304059-b199-4158-a46e-7fdc5ea1a042> (accessed November 8, 2023)

Cooperation: As an offer to other NATO countries, Germany could order more materiel – for instance armed vehicles – than the Bundeswehr currently needs. The goal would be to increase economies of scale and interoperability. Other NATO countries could then lease or buy the systems from a pool.

Resilience

When it comes to the resilience of society, too little is being done and planned. Although both the federal and state governments are drawing up a new directive on civil protection, they have not budgeted any funds for it. The budget for disaster relief is even facing cuts.¹⁰

Resilience initiative: Resilience happens at the micro level, with the support of citizens, municipalities, public institutions, associations, and businesses. It is important to involve the public closely in the organization of the “Security Decade,” as a sense of ownership will strengthen people’s capacity and motivation for resilience. Topics that are important for resilience include urban planning, energy supply, transportation routes, and much more that directly affects people. Their participation can be ensured through competitions, education, training camps, and many other interactive formats.

More resources for civil defense: The federal and state governments must visibly increase their investment in civil defense, including in disaster and population protection, security of supply, and the protection of critical infrastructures. A national spending target for civil defense could be adopted to ensure sufficient financing. Public contracts to equip civil defense and critical infrastructure should be prioritized when public contracts are awarded. This would apply, for example, to the construction of roads and bridges and to the energy supply. As an integral part of total defense, the relationship between the state, the economy, and society should be redefined, as many infrastructures are privately owned.

Resilience internship: Instead of compulsory military service, there should be a mandatory internship for all people aged 18 to 65 living in Germany to give them experience in areas relevant to total defense. This would create an incentive to identify appropriate areas in the private sector and society. At the same time, it would help identify the activities that are necessary for the country’s ability to function. In this domain, everybody can find a meaningful role to play in the event of a crisis.

¹⁰ Terms such as civil protection or civil defense are also used to refer to the different responsibilities of the federal government, the federal states, and private actors. In this policy brief, these terms are used synonymously.

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